Before the Fold

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/31681877.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	F/M
Fandoms:	Shadow and Bone (TV), The Grisha Trilogy - Leigh Bardugo, Grishaverse - Fandom
Relationships:	The Darkling | Aleksander Morozova/Alina Starkov, General Kirigan/Alina Starkov, Mal Oretsev & Alina Starkov
Characters:	The Darkling | Aleksander Morozova, General Kirigan (Shadow and Bone), Alina Starkov, Nikolai Lantsov, Genya Safin, Mal Oretsev, Tamar Kir-Bataar, Tolya Yul-Bataar, Zoya Nazyalensky, David Kostyk
Additional Tags:	Time Travel Fix-It, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Slow Burn, Villain redemption (kinda), Hero corruption (kinda), blame this on ben barnes he made the darkling entirely too sympathetic, Unreliable Narrator, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Enemies to Lovers, Symbolism, i have plucked the things i like from the show and the book and the rest is going in the disposal, no beta we die like men, kind of malarklina? you can definitely read it that way, twist ending, Happy Ending, as always with my fics i recommend having a glass of wine nearby, or kids champagne--set a mood for yourself hun you deserve it, Sexism, Death
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-06-05 Completed: 2021-06-23 Words: 39,081 Chapters: 12/12

Before the Fold

by AceofNowhere

Summary

Using merzost, Alina and crew hatch a plan for her to go back to before the Fold is created, to stop it from ever forming.

But when she gets there, nothing goes to plan.

Notes

i don't know guys, seems like a bad idea ;)

Also, quick shout out to BrytteMystere for coming up with the awesome time travel prompts in the Cult of the Starless Discord server.

Also if you like, here's the playlist I created for this fic.

PRELUDE

Giant, black clouds that stood from the ground to the sky rippled before her, beckoning her entrance. The thick smoke mocked her, as if knowing her mission, as if waiting for her failure.

Alina stood now before Ravka's greatest weapon, its greatest hell, and prepared herself to go back to the beginning and unmake it.

The Fold hissed, taunting her.

Come inside then, O Great Sun Summoner, she could feel it impressing on her, *come meet your inevitable end*.

"Alina, wait," Mal said behind her. She turned and saw her partner, her best friend, and the connection between her and the Darkling's ghosts faltered a moment. That connection was stronger than ever, and going back was the only way to end it all.

Mal broke from her pack of friends—Genya, Nikolai, David, Nadia, Tamar and Tolya, all of them, even Zoya—and ran up to Alina.

Just inches from the Fold, she could see him squirm and he hesitated to stand next to her. He held out his hands, and she took the small object he held toward her.

She smiled.

He shrugged. "It isn't much, but you know what we learned—"

"Always have a weapon on hand," she finished.

Mal swallowed, and Alina tried to stop her throat from closing up. "You'll be lost without me," he said, and she laughed. A small tear wedged its way out of her eye, and he gripped her shoulder in response.

She gripped him back with all her strength. "Don't get into trouble without me."

Mal averted his gaze, up at the vicious wall of darkness before him, behind her. His eyes met hers, and they were filled with fear and regret.

You don't have to do this, his eyes begged her.

Come and tame me, witch, said the Fold at her back.

Alina let his hand go.

"Goodbye, Mal," she said, pocketing the small gift into her pocket. "If this all goes to hell, I'll meet you in the meadow."

Without giving herself another chance for weakness, she stepped back into the Fold while staring into his eyes.

“Alina—!” he cried.

He was the last thing she saw before the Fold swallowed her whole.

* * *

Hours passed; they felt like years.

Alina pressed her cloak more tightly around her, sheltering her from the smoke and ash and sand that littered the desolate Fold.

So brave, the Fold’s voice seemed all around her; it stroked her spine and she shuddered. *You’re almost there, sweet. Don’t stop now.*

Alina had read the map so many times, she could see it etched in her vision more clearly than she could currently see in front of her. She held her light higher and the shrieks of the Volcra echoed into the night.

She ignored those shrieks, the screams, why did they sound so much like people?, and continued to put one foot in front of the other. She checked her timepiece—a gift from Nikolai; she could still see his mocking grin and terror-stricken eyes as he placed it in her palm—and saw that in perhaps an hour, she’d be in position.

And almost to the minute, in an hour she was there.

Any vines and growth around the dilapidated centuries-old building would have long turned to dust since the Fold’s creation, but the husked out shell of whatever this place had been still managed to hold on. A team of Volcras hissed from a nest nearby, probably in the middle of the stone walls, and Alina took a breath and ignored them; she steeled herself, and uncrumpled a small piece of paper from her fur-lined pocket.

She was about to speak when the Fold called to her.

You don’t know what you’re doing, it said, and she could hear Baghra’s condescending voice in it. *You’re just a silly little girl playing with magic, magic that doesn’t belong to you.*

“The small science belongs to everyone,” she called back.

The Fold laughed. *Stupid girl, this is no science. You are about to use merzost, and you know what it ... has reaped.*

Another familiar voice was in there, and Alina shook out her head, as if that would stop it.

Alina, it whispered, *you are making a mistake.*

Or was that her own voice, telling her what she already knew?

Just like with Mal, Alina didn't give herself time to think. She'd finished thinking, back in those palace walls with Genya and Nikolai, on the road with Zoya and Mal, in the tents with Tamar and Tolya.

She would go back to before the Fold began, and she would stop it from ever forming in the first place.

It was the only chance they had to truly end the war and give all Grisha a chance at a life without endless pain and discrimination. With the Fold created, the Grisha had lost that hope, and the Darkling had always refused to see that. He saw the Fold as a weapon, and it was—but it was also a burden that was placed not only on himself, but on all Grisha who would ever be discovered or oppressed.

Every Grisha was a reminder of this wretched thing that had split families, created war, fostered division.

And the only way to end it, was to return to the moment it was created.

Alina clutched the paper in her hands and tilted her head up at the invisible sun above her.

"Old magic, I call to you and ask you lay your burden on me," Alina incanted.

Stop, the Fold told her.

"Lay upon me the powers of the Gods of Old and let me be your conduit, your guide," she continued.

Stop! the Fold cried, rasping and seething around her.

"I will be your crucible—fill me with your magic, bring me to the beginning! bring me to the start of this place!"

No! screamed the Fold, *you cannot do this! you don't know what you will reap!*

Alina clasped her hands and shot out a bright beacon of light, offering it to the Gods.

"GIVE ME YOUR POWER AND LET THE WORLD IGNITE WITH OUR GLORY!"

The world was spinning and at the sound of her final words, time stopped—

and then it shuddered.

The ground didn't move but it rolled, and an avalanche began and ended at the bottoms of her feet. Darkness hurled itself toward her and she screamed, thinking this must be Fold that had sabotaged and stopped her spell.

But then Alina felt her veins compress, contract and expand with light. Her flesh glowed a golden red and she tried to swallow but instead she vomited out light. Her throat opened and her mouth expanded to let the sun shine out of her stomach. Light without heat was a cold and vicious thing and it penetrated through her bones like tiny needles all over her body. She screamed again but only light, more light, poured from her mouth, her hands, her eyes, into the sky.

Around her the Volcra screamed and shrilled, flying in circles around her while they tried to desperately retreat from the Old Magic. The Fold itself heaved and limped around her, and the sky shook with a thousand stars expanding and glowing in time with Alina's breaths.

Alina made the world explode, and by the time she fell to her knees, it was gone.

She fell on her face before the dilapidated building, wasted and spent from using merzost. The darkness of the Fold was replaced by darkness of the night around her. And as she tripped into unconsciousness, Alina could barely feel the wind on her exposed cheek, the touch of soft grass on the other.

Nikolai's timepiece clicked softly in her upturned palm, as though nothing had passed.

But when morning came, and Alina would find herself on a makeshift leather cot surrounded by unfamiliar, frightened Grisha, she would know her mission—their mission—had succeeded.

She had gone back in time, before the Fold.

And Aleksander would be completely unsuspecting of his impending death.

You are not alone

“There has to be another way,” Mal countered, looking around the room for support.

Alina sat still in her chair, hardly daring to meet his gaze. The truth was right there in front of them, and it couldn’t be hidden away by wishful thinking.

“There are other powerful Grisha,” he continued, trying out his own argument, “if we could have them attempt to use merzost—”

“Which is inhumane and is, in all probability, likely to end with their painful death,” mumbled David from beside Mal. “Merzost is unpredictable; it often creates a result few would have guessed. There is always a cost, and using it can create irreparable damage if done so callously. Alina is the only one to have used merzost, aside from—” David cleared his throat and avoided everyone’s eyes in the room. He gesticulated his hand in the air, waving it around jerkily, uncomfortable. “She is the only one powerful enough to not die under its influence. Therefore, morally, logically, she is the only one we can allow to use magic.”

Mal whipped his anger toward him, eyes narrowed in fury. “‘Morally’? You’re one to talk aren’t you? You, who *bound* Alina to that stag’s collar in the first place. Without you, we wouldn’t be in this mess, would we?”

Alina placed her hands on the table. “The stag *chose* me,” she said quietly. The room was silent around her, but she could feel every pair of eyes upon her. “I would have had that connection anyway.”

Her gaze met Mal’s and she implored him. She, too, had once been furious at David for making the decision to place her under that collar, just as she had been at Genya for throwing away Mal’s letters. But the longer she was away from the Darkling, the more she understood how she had been far from the only one to have been under his charismatic influence. They’d all made righteous mistakes, and pointing fingers got them nowhere.

“Don’t blame David for something he had little choice in.”

“He *had* a choice though,” Mal hissed. “You have a choice now.”

The room was so charged a single breath would sound like a bullet.

“So,” Nikolai said, clapping his hands and trying to dispel the tension. He hardly succeeded, but Mal sat back in his chair, arms folded over his chest, and Alina returned her stare to the table. “That’s settled then. We work with Alina as the keeper of the merzost.”

He rolled his shoulders and lifted a brow. “Frankly, it’s better this way. I don’t think I’d trust anyone else with the stuff of the universe in their hands.” He winked at Alina and she rolled her eyes visibly. She then looked at him a beat longer, giving him a small signal at a “thank you.” He smiled a little wider, then turned his attention to the others, receiving the message.

"Now let's come up with a plan to save the world, so I can go back to marauding the seas and other fun things."

Alina didn't jump to awakeness, nor did she stumble. She simply opened her eyes. She inhaled deeply and stretched against the blanket that covered her and the cot that lay beneath her.

She'd dreamed she was alone on a ship, heading out into the True Sea. The storm had raged around her and she's held on to the front rail, staring out at the dark and powerful waves. She could hear yelling behind her, someone calling her name, but she was searching for something, searching—

Alina opened her eyes and she furrowed her brow in confusion. Her eyes darted around the unfamiliar room; blankets, coats, shawls, any fabric available, was hung from the open windows of the abandoned husk of a building to keep the chill out. So familiar yet different enough to give Alina pause.

She bolted upward and turned herself to face the people around her. She was largely ignored as she observed them: these tired, downtrodden folk. They seemed as though they were waiting for the worst of it, though they'd clearly seen pain enough already.

Alina watched their slow movements; they began packing their meager belongings, mostly food stores and warm clothing, as if preparing for another journey. She'd seen the Grisha back home, all in their prime. Years of training in the Little Palace, years of being feared and glorious warriors had painted an image of Grisha superiority in all of Ravka's mind.

But here, now, it was different. These Grisha were worlds away from their strong soldier counterparts. It shocked Alina when the correct word for these people came to her mind: refugees. These were the Grisha discriminated against and abhorred by the current king of Ravka; they were being run out of their own homes, villages, their country. These were the ones the king feared because one of them had stood apart. These were the people who paid a price for the action a single, powerful one among them had made.

"Healer!" she heard a man scream from several rooms away. "Where is a healer?!"

He was moving closer but must have stopped in the room beside hers. Alina lifted her blanket and pushed herself between the folds of hanging cloths, between the sorry-eyed people who now surrounded the man carrying a bloodied woman in his arms.

Even Alina could see she was close to death. But the man gently placed her on a bed, cradling her and begging for a healer.

"We only have a tailor," one Grisha said, "we were waiting for Luda…"

Alina saw the realization cover the woman's face, saw her face shudder and succumb to more sadness. This day wasn't over yet, but somehow hope was already lost. Alina looked at the pretty white face, now ashen and gray with death, and then her sight moved to the shaking hands that held her.

“Just mortal,” he whispered softly, and Alina’s heart began to beat wildly within her chest.

The Darkling stood not feet before her, only cloth, a broken body, and several centuries stood between them.

But not now, not anymore; now she was here, and she was there in time to stop the Fold from forming.

Alina averted her eyes when he turned her way. He wouldn’t recognize her of course, but she couldn’t fight the feeling that somehow he would recognize her. Perhaps even across the centuries, he would see his Sun Summoner and just know.

He walked past her, abruptly catching her shoulder while he moved with purpose to rooms beyond her.

Alina ignored the other Grisha around her—so pale was the thought of victory in the room, it was like walking with ghosts—and followed him to the back of the building. She touched the worn stone, and for a moment she was back within the Fold, watching the Volcra descend in swirling clouds while the Fold mocked her for her attempts to destroy it. Alina shook out her head and gripped the stone. She pushed herself away and continued to follow her enemy, whose death she would carry out.

Right after she found the spell he'd used to create it.

She knew she should kill him first, prevent the whole thing with a stroke of a knife. But looking at all these people now, she couldn’t take that risk. They might appear weak, but Alina knew better than anyone what weakness could hide. She wouldn’t risk her own safety to kill the Darkling; no, she would get him alone, and be smart about it.

Alina wandered the halls, quickly moving about and quietly avoiding the notice of others. She’d learned that in Keramzin—walk with purpose, avert your eyes, and no one will notice you.

Nestled away from the other Grisha surrounded by brick was a small library, an archive, that held boxes and boxes of books and documents. Alina parsed through them, deftly thumbing through them and looking for what she needed.

Grisha histories were compiled here: old diaries, medical notes, histories of familial lineage.

“We need to leave.”

Alina jumped at the sound, turning toward the familiar voice.

“Soldiers are sweeping west.”

He must be just a few rooms away, Alina could hear. She paused, then immediately turned around and resumed her work quicker than before. She knew she had no time—she needed to find that spell and get out. Later she would come back for—

—For the other job she needed to accomplish.

“They’re punishing us for being Grisha,” he continued, his voice bitter and hurt. Alina didn’t feel the sneer on her own face, didn’t feel it drop when she heard the second voice.

“They’re punishing you.”

Alina remembered the dark room, smaller than this, warmer than this, where Baghra first showed her herself. She remembered Baghra berating her, and now she could hear Baghra back in her element, condescending toward her son. But Baghra did have a way of revealing the truth, Alina remembered snidely.

“You’ve started a war on us,” she hissed, and Alina became desperate, hardly bothering to hide the noise she made while she shuffled through the papers. An old book, a diary, caught Alina’s eye, and with a feeling of connection Alina had learned not to ignore, she grabbed the book.

It fell open, and Alina saw her prize.

“Oh Aleksander,” said a voice in the other room, but Alina heard none of it.

She read the spells before her, seeing the merzost she herself had used just hours ago. She had used it to send her back centuries, but oh the damage these spells could do.

Alina’s hands trembled when her newly trained eye realized what she was looking at. Spells to transfer powers, spells to awaken the dead, spells to create monsters from men, spells—

Spells to create armies to wipe out the living.

This is what the Darkling had stumbled on all those years ago, just moments from now. Alone, surrounded, grieving, angry and afraid.

It was no excuse. It was never an excuse, but Alina couldn’t entirely ignore the sound of her heart breaking as she read over the pages and imagined another’s hands caressing the paper, holding it up as she had done to make the best decision he had seen as a way out.

Cornered animals bite to kill.

Alina pocketed the paper and reluctantly placed the book back where she found it. She knew he could find something else, another spell to cause as much damage, but she had to take the risk for now, and trust that she could distract him.

She only had a few more minutes, the Suli holy man had warned her. From the time she awoke she would have a single hour before the Fold would be created.

She had the spell that contained the power, now all she needed was to distract the man who could wield it.

Alina moved away from the library, listening to the two players in the room nearby.

“She died because of me,” she heard him say.

“She died because they always do,” Baghra chided. “They’re not as strong as us.”

Alina hid in the shadows of the room just outside theirs, sheltering herself between the bricks and the drapes that hung from the dilapidated ceilings. From the corner of her eye she could see them.

Baghra’s hair was an unrecognizable black, but her eyes were as lethal as Alina recalled. There were a few less wrinkles, but the face was the same. She shuddered at the image, imagining how long Baghra had truly been alive, how many years she’d had to master her own art of manipulation. How many years she’d had to steer her own son toward his dismal path.

“You’re the one who taught me to kill. Their blood is on both our hands.”

“I taught you to protect yourself! not them!” she saw Baghra sit back against her thin pillows, her dirty sheets, “but you’re so stubborn. You never listen to me.”

She leaned forward toward her son, “maybe you’ll listen now.”

Alina’s fists clenched in her hands while she listened to Baghra beg him to go west, to flee and care for himself—leave the Grisha, she told him. Come back when you have a chance.

As the argument unfolded, Alina didn’t know what to think. She heard Baghra telling him to bide his time, all the while he wanted to stay to defend the Grisha, to defend the poor souls just rooms away who’d given up all hope.

Maybe Baghra was right, Alina thought. Maybe if he had just left them all then, he could have found another way to save them. But in her heart she knew Baghra had already poisoned this well. From the way Alek—the Darkling was speaking back, he was insistent on fighting.

And how did you respond when Novokribirsk was snatched by the Fold? a voice asked her. How easy was it for you to turn away?

She still had no way of knowing if she’d done the right thing, to leave, to then return.

She leaned her head back into the brick, stopping herself from looking at him, from listening to his twisted words. There was no one to hear him now, no one to hear him while he tried and wanted, wanted so much, to save his people.

Everything I’ve ever done, she recalled in that moment, has been to make Grisha safer.

Alina dug her fingernails into her palms, and took a deep breath. She would not bow to avoid her challenge.

She would kill him.

Now she could hear him hatching his idea—”we could use merzost”—ready to take the plunge to fight against the king.

“I forbid it!” cried Baghra, and Alina could hear the genuine terror in her voice. “The small science feeds us, merzost feeds on us. You can’t control it.”

Alina avoided the thought that came to her mind, the one that told her she’d used merzost and survived. Perhaps magic is just another tool the powerful don’t want us to use, she thought unbidden, and she shook it off.

She heard the door open and shut, and she had her moment.

He exited the room and Alina came in through another door.

“Sir!” she called, not knowing what else to call him.

He turned around to face her, his mission stalled, and Alina nearly faltered. His hair was longer, his face was younger, but there was no mistaking those features: brown hair, thick and tied back; his lips, full, soft; his eyes—

Within his eyes, she saw something there she’d never seen before.

“What is it?” he asked, impatiently.

“You’re needed below,” she said, trying to steady her breathing. “Immediately.”

“It must wait,” he said, turning back around, heading straight for the archives.

“It cannot!” she said, but he ignored her.

She thumped her fists in frustration against her thigh, then ran after him.

“Several more Grisha have arrived,” she heard herself lying, “m-myself included.”

“I thought you looked unfamiliar,” he said, not breaking his stride. In moments he’d be knee-deep in Morozova’s spells, finding something of use, even if it wasn’t the spell she held in her pocket. “I’d remember your face. You’ve come from Shu Han? Regards to the rest of your crew, I’ll meet with you all later.”

“I’m not—that’s not—I can fight. We can fight the army that’s coming.”

The young man eyed her, patronizingly humored, as he opened the door to the archive. Alina cursed his determination and wished they’d had more time to prepare this whole charade. What good would it be to come here just to watch him create something just as terrible, or more so, than the Fold? What was she doing?

Out of ideas, Alina did the one thing she knew would get his attention.

“Wait!” she shouted, and then called forth the light from her soul. It bled into the room and she didn’t notice him shield his eyes from her.

Alina felt the pull of her small science, and she smiled for the first time in days. She had nearly forgotten how good it felt to summon her light; it was when she felt most alive, when the sun erupted from her. She felt altogether sane, soothed, and full. It was like, back in the meadow with Mal, except—

Except when she was in the meadow with Mal, she had always imagined herself here. Surrounded by light, comfort. She was herself, and she was whole. She was complete.

The light died down, and Alina heard herself panting loudly in the space. She didn't realize how much effort it'd taken to bring forth that bit of light—her powers, though present, seemed… different, somehow. Like before she had her collar.

The Shadow Summoner across from her held his eyes wide open in shock. He looked lost, frightened, but more than that he looked ….

What was that look in his eyes?

"I thought I was the only one," he seemed to whisper to himself. As she stared into his eyes, she felt her own heart constrict. She remembered what he'd said to her, once.

"You are not alone," she whispered.

Silence was all they knew for a single breath of moment.

Then the alarm bells tolled.

Both of them startled, turning their attention toward where the noise came. There was a quick glance between them, and then he was again on the move.

"I'm out of time," she heard him say, "there's only one choice left." She followed him as he walked toward the front. Grisha passed them all by, all exiting out the back and leaving their leader to deal with the army that called to them on their broken doorstep.

He had nothing, Alina reminded herself, this was his last moment.

She nearly laughed to herself, relieved. She wouldn't even have to kill him herself, she realized. The army would do it for her. History would forever be changed. She felt the light giddiness levitate her soul when she thought of it.

No more Fold. No more war.

At least, not a war they couldn't win, not anymore.

Unexpectedly he turned toward her. "Will you help me?" he asked. "Will you distract them with your light, when I call for you? We only need to buy the others time to get away from here."

Alina nodded, a lie, but not sure what else to do in that moment. She watched the smile light up his face and caught herself before she mirrored it. He reached out and grasped her hand, holding it in his own for a moment.

“All this time,” he said, looking at their hands. He shook his head and gazed at her with his dark stare. “I’ll call for you. When I raise up my hands, shine your light at them—blind them if you must. I’ll call the shadows to help us make our escape.”

Alina watched the man who was about to die, and she saw what she’d missed earlier.

She had expected the large, black eyes, she’d expected the patronizing look from earlier, even the pig-headed manner with which he always made his rash decisions.

But she hadn’t expected was this naked hopefulness, this seed that was beginning to grow in his heart reflected in his stare.

“We are not alone,” he told her, and went out to meet the army.

A Burst of Light

Chapter Notes

> Point #1: in s2 Zoya should be allowed to say "fuck."
> Point #2: Tolya is perfect and has never done anything wrong in his life, ever. We know this and we love him.

It was in the seventh hour of their meeting that the group finally fractured completely. Zoya, David and Alina wanted to test the bounds of what merzost Alina could use, and ask Baghra for more training. If anyone could train Alina at this point, it would be the old hag or no one.

Genya, Nikolai, Tamar and Tolya were convinced that finding the third amplifier would do the job, and experimenting with outside parlor tricks was a time-wasting risk.

Mal, of course, was on his own side and wanted them to just kill the Darkling and be done with it.

“Killing the Darkling *won’t* banish the Fold, you asinine, confounding asshole,” Genya said heatedly, finally losing it with Mal. Alina gave her a look and Genya gave her one back. “How the hell can we get anything done if we’re all trying to simply justify the use of force?”

“When you have a *person* as the *weapon*,” Mal said, seething through his teeth, “then *yes*, you do need to justify it. And you can’t,” he added, which made Genya nearly throw a book at him before Tolya stopped her.

“She is the Sun Summoner,” Tamar said. “She is not just a person, she’s a saint. Your possessiveness over her will stifle her potential. She is meant for greatness and to free the world. Stop holding her back.”

Mal turned on her. “Who are you even? Why are you here? You don’t know her, none of you do! I know her! Apparently, I’m also the only one who cares about her, herself included.”

Alina was about to open her mouth and defend herself when Nikolai yawned loudly and with just the right amount of obnoxiousness.

He had been leaning back in his chair and watching the others bicker; now he turned his amber-filled glass in his hand. “It seems we are at an impasse. I suggest a compromise.”

“Fuck you and your compromises,” Zoya grumbled, brushing out her hair with her fingers. How her hair was still so glossy and perfect after seven hours in a confined room, Alina could never guess. “I’ve an idea,” she said sarcastically, “why don’t we just go back in time, kill the Darkling, and prevent the Fold from ever happening. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

Zoya returned to frowning at a split end, but David, noticeably, froze.

“P-prevent—” he paused, then suddenly left the room. The others mumbled to each other, shrugs and eyerolls started to go around, but before any of them could go back to their argument, David reentered with an old book the size of Alina’s torso. He placed it on the desk, and with utter cautiousness, hovered his hands lightly over the cover.

“I believe Zoya has come up with a feasible solution.”

“A feasible what-now?” she asked in flat disbelief.

David placed his hand on the cover and delicately opened it, turning to a specific page his eidetic memory told him to go. He frowned, and his clenched teeth made an audible clack when he found what he sought for. He pointed to the page, toward a paragraph.

“Merzost is the power of creation,” he explained.

Zoya groaned. “Even a child knows that.”

He held up his hands, asking for patience in his way. “It is the making of the world, the fabric of the universe, tell me—” he asked, a grin coming and going in a flash, “what else is the universe made of?”

A pause. “Dirt?” asked Tolya, uncertain.

David blinked. “Time.” He shook out his head and fluttered his eyes. “*Time* is what binds the universe together. Conceivably, using merzost could—unmake—time, and we could go,” he gestured behind him, “back.”

“Back?” Alina clarified. “Before the Fold?”

“Yes,” David nodded, smiling a little wider. “Exactly.”

Alina watched the young, hopeful man depart from her, and she opened her mouth, reached out at his back for a moment to—

To what? To object? To warn him?

She shook out her head and ran away, far enough away to give her cover from the army, to hide herself, but close enough she could hear them speak.

Luckily, the commanding officer was loud enough to be heard from near anywhere.

“We have you surrounded,” he called, grinning at the Darkling like a cat with a cornered fish. “If I see you move your arms, I’ll kill everyone inside that place, and your mother, too.”

Alina watched as they surrounded him; they moved almost lazily. There were tens of them, one of him. It was as if they knew exactly how afraid the Grisha were, and exactly where to press his buttons.

They held all the cards, but the Shadow Summoner before them wasn't bending at the knee. She could see the malice in the commander's eye from behind the bush where she hid. He was anticipating trouble, and would cut down anything that stopped him from his mission.

The sound of leaves brushing against something sounded beside her and Alina ducked down further. To her right, she could see more soldiers, all heading around the back, away from the Darkling. More soldiers, all heading toward…

The Grisha. They were going to kill them anyway, she realized.

She recalled their dirty, exhausted faces. They would stand no chance, trained or untrained, against these fresh soldiers. There were children among them, would they be killed, too? Alina already knew that answer, had known it because she'd learned it from Baghra.

Alina glanced back to the front of the building, and she heard his voice while the commander shouted to his men to shoot him should he move his hands.

"I may not have your army," the Darkling said, "but I will have my own."

He screamed out for her, shouting over them all, "Call forth the light!"

Alina waited, breathless.

She didn't move.

She watched him falter, turn his head to look for her.

"Your light, call forth the light!"

Still, she stayed hidden.

The rustling to her right didn't cease, and in the distance, she heard a startled cry, gasps of fear.

The soldiers had reached them now.

Alina dipped her hand into her pocket and took out Mal's gift. It was nothing but a thin letter opener, hardly sharp enough to cut paper, but it had been the thing she most associated with Mal during her first weeks in the Little Palace. When they'd finally reunited, she'd given it to him as proof of her loyalty, as proof she'd remembered everything they had learned together at Keramzin.

But that wasn't her real weapon at all.

In a split second she knew—she wouldn't be strong enough to fend off the whole army going after the Grisha, her powers were too weak in this place.

But she could surprise them, and let another save the Grisha.

Alina erupted from the bush with a cry and blasted her light into the soldiers that surrounded the Darkling from behind. Instantly, the bows were turned and drawn toward her, toward this new threat they had no idea existed. Alina drew back her arms and speared them with her light, throwing one flash out at a time, blinding them individually.

An arrow shot passed her shoulder, nearly missing her. She wouldn't last long.

"They're after the others!" she shouted. "Go!"

"Kill her! Kill the both of them!" the commanding officer bellowed, and several soldiers were aiming their weapons toward her at once.

Her adrenaline kicked in, and she managed to arc a single ray of light around herself, shielding her body from their arrows. The arrows cracked and broke against the shield, and Alina held it fast, not moving or expending any unnecessary energy.

Soldiers kicked, slung more arrows, tossed spears against the shield, but it held.

Time passed and it felt like years. Sweat pooled at the small of Alina's back and her head ached from the strain of holding up her guard. For a moment she slipped, and an arrow pierced through. She dodged it and it narrowly missed her leg, just managing to slice open her pants and the outside of her thigh.

Alina shouted in pain, but she held her position, digging her heels into the ground below.

Then the soldiers came up with a new strategy. Several of them at once grabbed their swords and slammed against her shield of light at once. It felt like being pelted with rocks, and Alina screamed as they hit her again and again. She forgot what she was doing, only instinct kept the shield around her. But it decreased, getting smaller and smaller with every hit. Alina faced the sky, and beyond the waves of her own light, beyond the soldiers below, she saw stars, flickering their light, calling to her.

Exhausted, spent, delirious, Alina reached out her hand to try to grasp one, to take its light into her own palm.

She heard the ticking of her timepiece in her pocket, she felt the letter opener in her other. She could hear the singing of the merzost spells against her chest.

She had succeeded, in part at least, she recalled. Alina smiled, and brought her hand back to her chest. Her light dimmed, and she barely heard the cry from beyond the army that nearly had her.

A resounding boom filled the air, and Alina jerked, as if stunned. She fell to the ground, wasted and spent, and her light shield burst like a stretched bubble. Alina's upturned face saw the stars were now covered with darkness.

"Hold on," she heard someone say.

"Mal…" she asked, eyes blurring as a man with dark eyes hovered over her.

“Hold on,” she heard, before the darkness took her.

Alina was tired of waking up in unfamiliar places.

Her back ached, her legs ached, oh, all *over* ached. She felt like she’d jumped into a pool of rocks. Alina lifted her hand to cradle her head, and rolled over into a fetal position.

She wanted to be home, in a soft bed with her velvet robe; she wanted Genya to barge in snapping and getting her ready for some formal function; she wanted Mal to walk in with sweet rice; she wanted, she wanted—

“Why didn’t you come when I first called you?” she heard an angry voice before her.

She could feel the warmth of the fire now, and while the light of it sent pangs of hurt to her eyes, she adjusted slowly and inhaled deep breaths. She heard the hoot of an owl, scratchings of small animals in the wood. She could hear the trees whispering as they swayed in the nighttime breeze.

“Well?”

Alina sighed heavily and turned over, avoiding her companion. “Where are the others?” she asked.

“I managed to see them off, most were unharmed,” he answered simply. “I’ve sent them West, where they’ll have a chance.” Alina could feel the charge in his voice lower to a simmer from a hot boil. But the fire was still burning. “Well?” he asked.

“Well what.”

“Answer my question. If you’d come when I’d first called you, we could have handled them. Don’t you know what we could do together?”

“No,” Alina said, pulling herself up and turning back toward him, glaring into his petulant face. “We couldn’t have. We wouldn’t have known the others were being harmed, because neither of us would have known about it. I waited because I had to.”

“So you admit it,” he said meaningfully before stoking the fire. “You did wait.”

Alina glowered at him. “I don’t actually trust you, you know.”

The young man glowered back. “And how can I trust you? After that?”

“I supposed you can’t,” she said. She adjusted her position, stretching out her arms, her neck, and groaning at the pain. She grasped her own shoulders and pinched them tightly, massaging the muscles. It’d be days before she was right again.

She hadn’t had to struggle with her powers like this, not since she had just found out she was Grisha. Could it be an effect of the time travel? Were her powers as weak as they had been if she’d never been trained?

Alina sighed when she rubbed out a knot in her shoulder. She ignored the man on the other side of the fire.

“Who are you?”

She was almost surprised that he’d chosen that as his second question. Why it hadn’t been his first, well, it was unimportant now.

“I’m a Sun Summoner,” she said. “Obviously.”

He said nothing back, and she rolled out her neck as she waited for him to come up with another question.

She was so tired, and she wanted to sleep. She wanted to be done with her mission, to go back home. But she would be in this state for a few days, and she was in no condition to be fighting to kill, much less use more merzost to get her home. She wouldn’t be able to spring an attack for days yet, so she had to draw this out.

Alina eyed him from over the fire, and watched him watching her.

“You can call me Starkov,” she said. She didn’t know why, exactly, she withheld her name. Maybe she did it because he had done the same to her for so long. Maybe she didn’t trust her name on his lips. She had nearly given up everything for that, once.

“I’m Aleksander,” he said, and she froze. So quickly? she wondered. Why would he give up his name so easily?

“Aleksander,” she said, testing out his name on her tongue. She said it slowly, as though it were a new dish, but little did he know she’d known it for centuries.

Little did he know, she realized, and began to relax. Now she held all the cards.

“Pleasure,” she said, and he made no move to reciprocate.

He merely stoked the fire and stared at the flames.

Alina sat back on her haunches and crossed one sore leg over the other.

“So,” she asked noncommittally. “What’s your plan?”

Aleksander said nothing.

“Kill the king?” she suggested. “Take the throne? Free all Grisha?” She tried to keep the smile out of her voice, but it was laughable how predictable he was. Surely already he was planning exactly how to manipulate and conquer the king so he could rule in his stead—he, who knew so much, who knew *exactly* what everyone needed and took away their chance at doing the right thing so *he* could do what he *thought* was the right thing.

The right thing for whom? she thought bitterly.

“No,” he answered, surprising her out of her thoughts. “No. And yes.”

It took a moment for Alina to realize he was answering her questions.

“No and no what?”

“No I won’t kill the king or take his throne,” he clarified. “But yes, I will free all Grisha.”

The smile was shocked from Alina’s face.

“You and what army?” she asked, and cringed when she realized the implications of saying that out loud. For all she knew, with her messing the timeline this way, she was giving him the idea of starting the second army.

“My mother asked me that,” he said, and Alina sneered. The idea that she sounded anything like Baghra was enough to make her sick. “And maybe I could create one. Maybe that’s what we need.”

Alina scoffed, tried to sound less than nervous. “You can’t exactly go around forcing people into armies.”

“The king does,” he countered.

“You want to be like him?” she asked. “The king who uses soldiers, then wastes them? Kills them?”

“So you know that much about me then,” he said.

She tapped her fingers against the grass below her. “Everyone knows that much about you. There aren’t that many Grisha who can summon shadows.”

“And you?” he asked, turning the conversation back over to Alina. “Are there other Sun Summoners … wherever you come from?”

Alina frowned. “I’m Ravkan,” she said.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I judged you on appearances. I should know better.”

His admission stunned her to silence. “Yes,” she said cautiously. “You should.”

“Well?” he said after a pause. “Have you met others like you?”

Alina called forth just the bare glimpses of light from her fingertips, just enough to make them glow. She dissipated the light, and clenched her hands into fists.

“Fortunately, no.”

“Fortunately?”

“Did you want this power?” she asked. She realized she’d never asked him this. They’d spoken about her powers once, when she’d been discovered. She’d never wanted them; she’d never appreciated them. But she’d never actually asked him the same. “Would you give your powers up, if you could? Give them to someone else?”

Aleksander looked down at his own hands, and it became harder and harder for her to remember what a monster she’d known him as. Here he was just a young man, lost in the woods with her, questioning his own identity, whether his pain and struggles were worth it.

“Sometimes,” he whispered, like his thought was on the edge of something new, like he meant to stumble into a full sentence.

Alina waited for the end of that sentence, but it didn’t come before she’d fallen asleep again.

* * *

The next morning they hid their campsite by distributing the ashes around the trees and throwing old leaves and branches over the firepit. Hardly a word was spoken between them, but there was an agreement that he would go and she would follow.

Alina almost grumbled to herself, wondering why he always seemed to have that assumption that others would follow him, and not the other way around. She had ideas; maybe she even had a plan. But he would never ask it of her, and she kept her silence because really, ideally, that was a good thing.

The more questions he asked, the harder it would become to remain hidden in her lie.

They headed east, toward Os Alta and the king. Alina had her doubts about his admission that he did not want to kill the king. Why wouldn’t he? she even had to ask herself. Everything the king had done had antagonized him, and now with another powerful summoner, she knew he was already stitching together a plan that would use her to gain leverage against Ravka’s ruler.

Alina complained little on their journey, but they did break often for small periods of rest. She still wasn’t hale after that fight, and while she could see the impatience in Aleksander’s twitching fingers, in his clenched jaw, he made no comment when she motioned for him to take another break.

They were seated by a river, and she was starving. She eyed the water beside them, searching for any food that could be caught. They had nothing between them and hardly a spear to catch any game. Alina sighed and tried to forget her hunger. What she wouldn’t give for Mal to be here with them. He could track down anything; with him around, she would have been fed and sated within the hour.

Alina closed her eyes and smiled, recalling his handsome face. Her smile slipped when she remembered it last, steps away from the Fold, petrified for her.

“Your companions must be worried for you,” Aleksander said, breaking the silence.

Alina’s heart skipped a beat for a moment, wondering in a panic if she had somehow revealed herself. How could he have known about—?

Then she remembered their first words together, and cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t call them companions,” she answered. “We met along the way.”

She cursed herself quietly. She was already giving up too much unneeded information.

He bit, just as she knew he would. “Along the way to here? Our abandoned sanctuary?”

Alina nodded, and offered nothing more.

“We told no one we didn’t know of that place,” he said. “How did you know about it?”

He said it so casually, but Alina could feel him mentally pacing around her like a predator. She had to be more careful if she was going to make it through the next few days unscathed.

“Luda told us,” she said. It was a bold risk—she didn’t know who this Luda was, only that she was implied in the “we.” He could have meant Baghra, but that would surely oust her as a liar, and she knew it. She had to trust her instincts and tread carefully. Luda was dead and couldn’t refute her.

“You knew Luda?” he pressed. “She never mentioned a Grisha who could summon the sun.”

Alina shrugged. “She didn’t know I could.” Not technically a lie; she was getting the hang of it.

Aleksander pulled some water from the river, drinking from it, gearing up to ask more questions.

“Why are we going to see the king?” Alina asked him before he could continue interrogating her.

“Because,” he said.

She waited. When he said nothing, she gestured for him to continue. “That’s it?” she asked. “‘Because’? You’re making this up as you go, aren’t you?”

“When did you meet Luda?” he asked.

Alina swallowed. “What’s with the questions? Haven’t I proven myself?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t trust you.”

Alina opened her mouth to protest, to turn to him and defend herself, when her back suddenly met the ground. He landed on her with precision and she threw out her hands to blind him with light, but he grasped her first, pushing her hands to the ground. She growled and bucked beneath him but he held her fast, his knees pinning her hips, his locked arms pinning her own. His black eyes watched her and Alina challenged him right back.

“I’ve let you come with me thus far, because I believe you will be useful to me,” he said slowly, tightening his hands around her wrists. “But I know I’m stronger than you, and I also think you may have been sent here to kill me. So don't, for one moment, think you have the upper hand on me. I have survived centuries; I will survive more."

Alina couldn't help the burst of laughter that erupted from her. She laughed so hard she shook beneath him and her limbs relaxed and loosened. Even the soreness of her body didn't stop the full-bodied laughter that continued for a solid minute.

By the end of it there were tears in her eyes, and she was smiling up at him, at his ridiculous posturing and his overused phrases.

"I'm sure you say that to all the girls," she said.

Aleksander stared at her a moment, probably weighing the new probability of her insanity, and finally let her go, slipping off of her as easy as he'd knocked her down.

Alina didn't move, and instead just sighed.

"I'm hungry," she admitted. "Can we please find some food?"

Aleksander may have rolled his eyes. "There's a cabin up ahead," he said. "We'll be there by dusk, rest up for the night, gather provisions, and head out at first sunlight."

"That place wouldn't happen to have horses would—"

Alina's remark was cut short when a sound as loud as thunder rang in their ears. In their confrontation, neither had noticed the animal sneaking up behind them both, hungry for the fish in the river.

A bear several times their size roared a stone's throw away, and ran straight for them.

The Same Coin

Chapter Notes

So I actually finished the whole thing...should I just dump it at once?

Also, thanks Hood Nature for teaching me how everything Alina does when she sees this bear is the wrong thing to do.

That's our girl!

“Well then,” Nikolai smiled and opened his hands wide, “what are we waiting for? Get the spell! Let’s go! Tell the servants to pack my best coat.”

David held up a finger to his lips, then held up another to stop everyone from talking at once. “It’s an incredible risk,” he said. “Time, of itself, is chaotic, and anything about the past that is changed will—create—” he covered his face, then his hands leaped toward the ceiling, “thousands of potential outcomes for the future. Some could be worse.”

“Worse than the Fold?” Genya asked, and David shrugged.

“Could be, yes.”

“But it can definitely be done,” Alina stood and walked over to David. “You know for an absolute certainty we could go back in time, to before the Fold was created, and find a way to stop it.”

“I know for an absolute certainty that *you* could go back.” David gulped and looked everywhere except her eyes. “And whether you could stop it … that would be up to you.”

“I know,” she said defiantly. “I can do it.”

She turned to face the rest of the room. She’d had enough of the fighting, the arguing over what she could and could not do. She was Alina Starkov, the Sun Summoner, and it got dark when she said so. If she were sent back, she could destroy the Fold before it was created, she knew it.

But now she had to convince her team.

“We have sat and argued the possibilities, and right now, we have one certainty in our favor.

“This is the best chance we have to destroy the Fold—” she heard Mal scoff and she turned to him, “—and the Darkling in one go. It has the fewest casualties, and the highest probability of succeeding. What, for saints’ sake, *are* we waiting for?

“People continue to die while we argue here, I get that now. So there’s no time to waste.” She paused, but she did not wait for an objection. “We will do this. I will go back, and destroy the Fold.

“Now will you help me, or will you leave? Because those are your options. *Choose*.” It was just enough of a mock to make Mal flinch, to make them all go deathly still for a moment.

Zoya stood from her chair and walked over to Alina. She grinned haughtily, raising her chin just so. “I’d love to see you screw this up, Starkov.” She held out her hand, and Alina shook it. “I’m in.”

“Well,” said Nikolai, “with two lovely ladies on that side, there I must go as well.” Alina smiled at the small sparkle in his eye. “I’m in, too.”

“We are always with you,” said Tamar, and Tolya nodded beside her.

Genya sighed. “Someone will have to know what you’ll need to wear to fit in several centuries ago.”

David cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t have mentioned it,” he flicked his gaze quickly to Alina, then away, “if I didn’t think you could do it.”

At last, they all turned to Mal, who sat in his chair, eyes tethered to the table.

“‘Choose,’” he repeated, so softly. “Maybe I do understand what you mean.” He looked at her, and Alina went cold when she saw the flatness of his stare. “You are so much like him.”

The bear charged at them and Alina screamed, frozen to her spot on the ground. She covered herself with her arms and felt a dark fog moving over her.

Aleksander had responded instantly, using his shadows to confuse the bear, but the animal didn’t break his speed. Alina seized her moment and jumped up from the ground, all while the bear swatted at the shadows and roared its displeasure.

The bear’s head turned when it heard Alina backing away; she inadvertently snapped a tree branch beneath her boot. It bellowed and immediately began another charge.

Alina, knowing nothing about bears, having grown up near rabbits and grain and the cruelty of angry orphans, ran.

She pumped her arms and let her legs carry her as fast as she could, leaving the river and heading deeper into the forest, having no idea where she was headed. She wasn’t thinking, only trying to get away from the mammoth animal that was easily able to keep pace with her. Alina began to limp now but her fear kept her speed up. She dared to turn back at one moment and the bear was only steps away.

She gasped and turned back to front, just in time to miss a branch that would've clocked her in the face.

The bear merely swatted it aside as though it were a leaf.

Tears spread across her cheeks due to Alina's speed, her fear, but she couldn't keep this up any longer. She had to take a stand. Deciding on her moment, Alina leapt around a tree and circled to the left. The bear matched her and with another left, she was able to turn around and throw out her hands. She pressed them together and let out a stream of light to confuse the bear again and allow her—

What? Time, she supposed?

Alina's breath came in horrified pants, and when her light ran out, the bear was just feet away, towering over her like a monster from one of her childhood stories.

Alina let out a gasp, a cry, and fell to the ground again, horrified it had come to this.

A flash of smoke, darkness, and the tree beside her shuddered. A crack sounded and both she and the bear watched as the tree split in half. Alina lunged to the side, narrowing avoiding the large trunk landing on her.

The bear, finally spooked enough to forget Alina, ran off.

Alina lay on the ground, panting, shaking; her previous hunger was forgotten and she nearly fell to the ground again when she heard a step sound beside her.

But it was just Aleksander, offering her a hand.

"You manage to attract some trouble, you know," he said.

Alina gulped, and tried to catch her breath. "You get used to it." She took his hand, and stood on quivering legs.

She could have said "thank you," but she didn't. Those courtesies had never been their way. Besides, he was never one to do something out of the kindness of his heart. He had saved her because he found her useful; thanks was more than he deserved.

Alina nodded to him, and he nodded in return, again walking east. Neither of them spoke again until they reached the small cottage in the woods.

It was a deceptive little thing, almost hidden to the eye. The sharply angled roof, made for a deep winter snowfall, gave it the impression it was leaning, as if waiting for someone to say, "hullo!" and give it a little wave before the journeymen passed on.

Leaves of green and yellow from the trees at its back camouflaged it to strangers who did not know it, but the small windows like cracked eyes waking in the morning were a beacon to those who did recognize the haven. The sunlight touched a glass window and it shimmered against the pane, as if winking to Alina.

Without warning, a thought of Nikolai entered her mind, and she mourned his humor in that moment. What might he say about her nearly getting mauled by a bear while she traveled back into the past?

Perhaps, "Well done, Starkov, only you could manage a horrific death by beast when the Darkling is right in front of you," or "Ah, reminds me of that time I was nearly gutted by a Zemeni boar," then he would proceed to a tell a tale as tall as a mountain.

Alina's heart fell, but her feet kept her moving into the cottage, and straight to the cupboard in the back.

She shoved a full handful of nuts into her mouth, and packed the rest into a small knapsack she'd seen attached to the back of the door. She and Aleksander moved around each other, neither of them ready to discuss her impending treachery, neither of them wanting to reflect on their past danger.

Alina eyed the bathtub enviously, desperately wishing for a bath to soak her sore muscles and clean herself from the sweat that had inevitably come from battle and the long hike. She left Aleksander to count the wares of what they'd need for their journey—he was always good at planning and preparation, she acknowledged—and searched for a well that might supply the water. She found one toward the front, grinning to herself when she saw the attached bucket.

She lowered it and began the arduous task of setting herself a bath.

She didn't bother thinking about heating it, she only wanted to be clean. She carted the water back and forth, continuing for the better part of a half hour until it was nearly half full. She poked her head into the sitting room. Aleksander was parsing through their supplies, clearly busy.

She shrugged to herself, then closed the curtain separating them and began to remove her clothing. They'd need a wash too, she realized, but knew there was no time for that. She had no separate spare clothing—she would just have to weather being in the same clothes for a few days.

She wrinkled her nose when she discarded her underwear, thought for a moment, then placed them at the foot of the bath. She could at least wash these after she was finished.

Her lungs froze and she made an audible squeak when she entered the cold water. She reminded herself to breathe—she'd had enough cold baths in the Keramzin and the army to prepare her to a less than luxurious life, despite her time in the Little Palace—and then relaxed into the bath, slowly.

Alina grasped the soap on the tray nearby and scrubbed herself all over, some parts twice. She was nearly shivering by the time she was through, but she was clean, smelling of lavender, and just a little bit happier than she had been minutes ago. She washed her undergarments in the same water, then returned to the sitting room with the damp material.

She noticed the conspicuously empty fireplace and moved to begin a fire so she could dry her items and they could warm themselves for the night.

“No fire,” said Aleksander. “They’ll follow the smoke.”

Alina glared at him from her crouch beneath the mantle. “You made one last night.”

“There was no way an army could have traveled so far to us so quickly,” he replied. “But one extra day might give them enough time.”

Alina looked at the wet underwear in her hands, frustrated. She held one hand over it and began to use her light to warm them, to heat the water away.

“No light either,” Aleksander reprimanded her, and she scowled at him again.

She walked over to him, stomping her boots into the wooden floor, and grabbed the blanket that sat beside him. She sat back down by the fireplace, threw the blanket over her head and used the light again, under the secrecy of the thick wool, to dry her underwear.

She might have heard a light noise from Aleksander, one that might be categorized as a laugh, or perhaps an amused scoff.

It took some time, but eventually her garments were dried, and she returned to the bathroom to put them on.

“I haven’t drained the water,” said Alina. “In case you wanted to do your own laundry.” She snorted. “You’ll have to figure out your own method of drying though.”

“I have clothing here,” he said.

Alina wrapped the blanket around herself and moved to sit on a short sofa in the corner of the room. Aleksander sat in his chair; his packing completed, he now sat reading a book, an old journal perhaps, or a ledger.

The room was cozy, thoughtfully so. There were blankets on every seat, cups on every surface. Each of the cups had a unique smell to them, and Alina recognized it as the strong tea many Ravkans drank toward the west side of Ravka. It was much more bitter than the sweet tea of the southern region she was raised in, but the smell made her think of home, of a time centuries from now.

Aleksander’s hair covered his eyes, the expression of them. His mouth was a thin line of concentration, his shoulders were fraught with tension.

She looked around the space again, at the twilight beams hitting the walls in such a way that made them look pink, and she stared back at Aleksander.

“This was Luda’s place.”

He said nothing.

She shouldn't have brought it up. She could imagine the pain was still fresh. He’d never once mentioned a Luda to her, but how many Ludas were there, after Luda? How many women had he attempted a life with, only to watch them die young, die old, die quietly, or in pain?

A small itch in the back of her eyes crept in silently, and a whispered voice asked her how many Mals she would have over the centuries she would be alive.

Alina wiped a tear from her eye. She rolled over on the couch, bringing the blanket over her head.

She had a rotten sleep that night.

In the morning, Aleksander had her change into a dress.

She fought it, citing it as “ridiculous,” asking “what if we run into another bear?” and settling on "it's ugly and I hate it."

“If we run into another bear,” he assured her, “I’ll simply let it eat you this time.” He ignored her other points.

The clothes she was wearing were too masculine, he argued, gave her away as suspicious. She argued that no one had commented on it at the Grisha's hidden compound, but Aleksander shook his head.

“The deeper into the woods we go, the stranger it will look for a woman to be wearing anything outside of conventional standards. A man and a woman walking in the woods are less likely to gain notice than a man and a woman wearing men’s clothing.”

Alina caved, but she wore the dress over her pants. She really wasn’t going to let another bear get the better of her.

Despite the wretched sleep, Alina was better rested and glad she’d taken the effort to bathe. She used the extra pockets provided by the dress to stash snacks for the road, which allowed them more time to walk and less to take breaks. She was getting stronger, she realized, which meant that soon, she’d need to—

Alina stopped suddenly in her tracks, realizing the one last thing she needed to do.

Sensing her switch in mood, Aleksander stood beside her, watching her face closely. She shook her head at him, grabbing another handful of nuts and shoving them into her mouth. But Alina couldn’t entirely remove the worried wrinkle of her brow, and it didn’t go unnoticed.

They’d trekked in silence the whole morning, and even though Alina knew she’d do better to keep silent, she itched for conversation.

“Why did you work for the king?” she asked him. She surprised herself to realize she actually wanted to know. Would this earlier Darkling tell her the truth? Would he feed her another lie?

“I saw a chance to make a change in the world, for the better,” he said.

Alina thought about it. “And you did that by fighting a war? By killing people?” He snorted condescendingly, as though she were making an argument he’d countered many times, but she shushed him. “How many of those people might have been allies? Or how many of the people you systematically kill—” she stopped him from interrupting her, “—yes, *systematically*, that is *what war is*, how many of them people might have sympathized with the Grisha once, had you not used your powers against them? Have you thought about that?

“And just maybe, just maybe some of those people *were* Grisha. You wouldn’t know.”

Now he was able to respond. “There are no Fjerdan Grisha,” Aleksander replied. “They’re all killed.”

“That you know of,” she retorted. “Plenty of Grisha hide, have for years. I—” she stopped herself, pivoted what she was about to say, that she had hidden for seventeen years unknown, “I believe you are ignoring the larger picture.”

If he caught her stumble, it didn’t alarm him.

“You speak as though you’re an expert. What experience do you have in battle?”

“More than you know,” she responded through clenched teeth, remembering each trip through the Fold as if it were moments ago.

“Then you’ll understand that the needs of the many outweigh those of the few—”

“Utilitarian nonsense—”

“Is it? How do you like eating nothing but dirt while your king eats a diminishing supply of pheasant, and afterward curling asleep underneath a down comforter filled with goose feathers? *This* is what the needs of the few are, because the moment they have power they take it and abuse it—they scapegoat the nearest thing that could potentially take that power, and who is that? The many. The poor, the othered, the Grisha. Us. They fear us, and that fear is power that should be used.

“You talk of how we hid—how *you* hid,” Alina hated that he’d grabbed hold of her mistake, “and why should we? Why shouldn’t we use our abilities to strengthen Ravka? Would that not make us greater and more unified?”

“*You* talk of unification, but only under your terms,” she shot back. “You know the moment you’re given power—Grisha or human, everyone is corruptible. What makes you different?”

“And what about you, woman with only a last name, girl who wears pants, an unknown Grisha who controls light—”

“I *am* those things,” Alina said through clenched teeth.

“And you hide behind them. Who are you? What are you?”

Maybe it was because he had asked her that before, and she had been too flummoxed to answer it in the tent after her first near-death encounter with the Volcra, so many years from now. But Alina's temper raged and soared like a Firebird and she stepped up to Aleksander, grasping her hand in his.

She gripped his palm with her own and called from deep within her; she used that part of her soul to call to his.

His powers responded to her own, and while her skin glowed beneath the surface, shadows encompassed them all around, whisking through the beams of light.

All was calm in those moments, when she stared into his eyes and he stared back, their powers answering each other with neither a sound nor word. And what did they say?

Peace. Serenity. Balance.

Darkness and Light, together; it made the day, it made night, it made everything in between more noticeable than each other, but together, they were one and the same. Two sides of the same coin.

Soulmates, came a thought unbidden, and Alina faltered. She let go of his hand, but the slide of their palms etched its way to pull at her stomach in a feeling she did not care to name.

"I am your equal," she said, and there it was again.

That look of hope he'd given her before the army, and on the other side of the fire. He stared at her nearly exactly as he had in the war room, when she'd come to him at night seeking comfort. He treated her as though she were comforting him. *I've been waiting for you a long time,* he'd told her.

Weeks later, she'd convinced herself it was an act. Baghra was right—he'd been using her from the start, manipulating her heart so she would empathize, agree, and do his bidding without question.

But seeing where she was now, with him centuries before that moment, how could she believe it was a lie when he was looking at her with that same longing look of hope?

"Help me," he begged suddenly. "Help me convince the king."

She furrowed her brow, confused. "How? Of what?"

"We can convince him Grisha are special. We are worth—" his eyes were so tender, so full of confidence, righteousness, "—so much. We can save them all. *Nothing* can stop us." Slowly, he reached out and grasped her hand again.

Though there was nothing to indicate it, she could feel their powers under the surface, like calling to like. She braced herself against the feeling of being too comfortable around him, against the ache of her heart that reminded her that after Mal, he was once hers, too.

She still needed to kill him before she could go home.

“We can save them *together*.”

Alina turned away at that last word and her heart nearly split in two. There were too many memories between them, too much pain, betrayal, and yes, love.

Tears flowed from her eyes, and she couldn’t explain them to him, so she didn’t.

Her eyelids fluttered, her vision blurred. She pulled her hand away from him, gripped her cumbersome, irritating dress, and walked on ahead of him.

They didn’t speak until the next day.

Who You Want To Be

Alina lay back and pulled at a loose thread from her robe. The soft velvet beneath her fingertips comforted her in a way her logic could not. She knew she was doing the right thing by going back and stopping the Fold's creation, but everytime she thought about Mal's betrayed face her heart sank deeper into her chest.

"Saints," Genya said, her weight dipping the bed slightly as she sat next to Alina. "You're worse than David when we fight."

"You two?" Alina scoffed. "Fight about what?"

Genya grinned from the corner of her mouth and shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing. Everything." She crossed one arm over Alina and leaned over her. Her hair smelled delicious and Alina, without thinking, took a small lock of hair between her fingers to replace the string she'd been fiddling with. "We're both work addicts—sometimes we need to relearn how to be together with each other."

Alina sighed and bounced one of Genya's curls by stretching it out and releasing it. She gazed up at Genya, the softest smile touching her face, and admired her friend's abrupt honesty.

"Tell me about us then," she said. "What do we fight about?"

Genya's smile flashed teeth. "You, being a reckless idiot." She tickled Alina's side and Alina burst into giggles.

"Since you're clever enough to think for both of us, it means I don't have to."

"Well thank you for your consideration, Living Saint," Genya teased. She and Alina sighed at the same time. "I suppose saints don't need brains, only hearts as large as oceans."

Alina rolled her eyes and reattached her attention to the loose string of her robe. Genya reached out and placed a hand against Alina's cheek. She lightly brushed away a strand of hair covering Alina's eyes.

Alina tried to hide from her, but Genya had that ability to look deep within her soul and call out exactly what she saw. That kind of vulnerability between them kept their friendship real. When all other paths were obscured, Alina could trust Genya to enlighten her. But sometimes, Alina thought while her cheeks heated beneath Genya's attention, she felt like a bug under a microscope, or a fish out of water. She might die if Genya voiced her feelings out loud.

"He'll come around," Genya whispered. "He always does."

Alina's tears erupted; her sadness burst from her chest. She grabbed Genya, who held on to her and shushed her like she might a small child.

For all that Mal had criticized Alina and helped her actualize and return to who she always was, this time had felt different. Being called a cosseted princess was one thing; being forced to acknowledge she had been so easily manipulated was another.

But Mal telling her to her face that she was so similar to the man whose anger had created the Fold was like looking into a mirror and seeing your own death.

"Remember this feeling when you go back," Genya whispered to her, so quietly Alina might have imagined it. "Remember who you are, and who you want to be."

Early the next morning, Alina lay awake, listening to the birds calling each other, singing a good morning to the wind, as she thought about her mission.

Genya had been right. She was too close to this, but she needed to figure out what her next move was.

She turned over on her side, trying to minimize the sound of crunching leaves beneath her. She only had a wool blanket to keep her warm, and it was hardly enough to wrap around her completely. The leaves below her acted as a barrier against the ground's chill, but it was hardly a quiet one. Alina peeked her eyes over her blanket to watch Aleksander sleeping several feet away.

She couldn't see his face, but his chest rose and fell softly. The sun had barely risen, so he'd surely be awake soon, but for now, she let her body relax as she ruminated over her current predicament.

The other half of her mission, beyond preventing the Fold, was to kill the Darkling. It was the only way they could be sure, they all agreed, that the Fold would never come to pass.

Well, "never" was never an absolute, but the odds of Baghra starting the Fold were minimal. Baghra, the only other shadow summoner in history aside from Aleksander, was the only one powerful enough to do it, but she didn't care enough about the world to affect it so.

Whereas Aleksander cared so much he would probably die trying to create *something*.

So it had to be done; since Alina was the only one who would be able to go back, she was the only one who could carry out this mission.

Alina held the small piece of paper, the one that had caused centuries of pain and a country cloven in two, lightly between her fingertips. She didn't dare mumble the Old Ravkan words aloud, but she read them in her head, and even that caused a small stir of magic to flow in her veins.

The light shone brighter in the clearing, the leaves rustling whispered louder in her ears. She could feel the water seeping through the roots of the trees and she could hear a bird flapping its wings from miles away. The words spread across the page like music—

She pressed the paper to her chest and closed her eyes, feeling the precise moment when Aleksander's eyelashes fluttered to wakefulness.

Her heart pounded in her chest, and she used the momentum of Aleksander rolling over to get up to tuck the slip back into her pocket, in the inside lining of her coat. While Aleksander's noises rose, Alina inhaled slowly and let out a yawn, feigning her own slow incline from sleep to awake.

She rolled up and saw he was paying her no mind, as usual. She rolled her eyes and rose, tucking her blanket under her arm while she dug around in her bag for some breakfast. They readied themselves for another day of travel, and with nary a word, headed out of the clearing within an hour of dawn.

It was Aleksander who broke their silence, when the sun was highest in the sky overhead.

"You never explained what the larger picture was," he said.

Alina didn't respond, and instead rolled her thoughts over in her mind, trying to find a way to articulate herself.

"You want to save all Grisha, but your plans only ever have war and fighting in mind," she finally answered. "I heard you speaking with, with the old woman," Alina answered, knowing she wasn't expected to know Baghra was Aleksander's mother. "You want to train the Grisha to fight—why is the answer always 'war' for you? Why do you think only war leads to peace?"

She could feel his attention on her as tangible as the sweat coating her skin. "There are other paths, you know, that could lead to peace for all Grisha."

"What are those?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to retort angrily, but stopped herself. Blinking at him, she realized she'd expected him to sound condescending—she always expected that from him, patronizing general that he was—but instead, he simply sounded…

Curious. As though he valued her opinion.

That, in all the time she had known him, had never happened before.

Then again, she reminded herself, the dichotomy between them was different now. Then, she had been 17, naive, hardly more than a sapling in his eyes. Now, she was a mysterious sun summoner; powerful, ageless, equal.

The realization brought a new taste into her mouth.

"You mean to separate Grisha from non-Grisha," she clarified his vision. Alina paused. She wanted to snap, to show her anger. But then she remembered those little lessons Nikolai had given her on the long road to Os Alta: *never let them see you weak when you feel it*. She slowed her tongue and calmed her temper. “I think this is a mistake.”

“How so?”

“By separating them, you force an image on both: Grisha, powerful and different; non-Grisha, weak and powerless.”

Aleksander raised an eyebrow. “That very power makes them respect us,” he said. “If they are forced to see us as the powerful beings we are—”

“They’ll band together and continue to try to wipe us out. They’ll only see us as a threat, as something different, and never acknowledge we have feelings like the rest of them; that we are just as human as they are, under it all.”

“But we aren’t otkazat'sya, Starkov,” he counters. “We are more than that.”

“We die like them. We love like them,” she said, “eat, shit, cry, laugh. We are the same in all the ways that matter. If we only focus on the differences we’ll never connect through our similarities.”

“Hmm, I had no idea you were such an idealist, Starkov.” Alina grumbled back a non-reply, and Aleksander said nothing. Soon they reached a thicket in the woods. The trees had been allowed to grow unchecked, and in the middle of the autumn season, the wild brush had grown and tangled into each other like a pocketed thread. He helped her through it, taking her hand and helping her step over logs; he pointed out the areas where the ground was unsteady, and even removed a few burrs from her dress after her skirt had snagged against an unfriendly bush.

When they paused to rest in the afternoon, she gave him a handful of her nuts. They chewed thoughtfully while the sun poked through the foliage and into their eyes, their jaws and hearts working effortlessly to keep them alive.

“You really don’t plan to kill the king?” Alina asked. Her question had no predication; she didn’t even remember thinking of anything before it came out of her mouth.

But there it was between them, and now Aleksander paused a long while before answering her.

“No,” he said. “And I know what you must think.”

Alina’s feet swelled in her boots, her legs hummed from the constant movement. But all she felt was anticipation, wanting to know exactly if, even now, he did know what she was thinking.

“You see me as a monster,” he said finally. “They all do, even other Grisha. Maybe that’s why I don’t see myself as human. I’ve started a war for this king, as you’ve said, and I am now on the hunt for doing so. I *do* think the Grisha should band together, I do think we should learn to fight and take care of ourselves.

"But the king is still the ruler of Ravka. If I can get him on our side, we will be safe." His eyes cut to her in sharp defense. "It's not easy, you know. You—" he paused in frustration, tilting his head and standing up to pace in front her. He was more on edge, this Aleksander, less of the cold marble statue than she remembered. This Aleksander was affected.

"Have you not been treated this way? People spitting on you, at best; trying to kill you, at worst. The first friend I made tried to murder me to take my bones for her own power. Grisha have turned against Grisha. What kind of life is this? I should not have to defend my life over and over. I should not have to explain to people why my life matters. Those in power have gone unchecked and have allowed us Grisha to believe the worst in ourselves. We don't question it, do we? How we are 'cursed' to bear these powers, how life would be 'easier' and 'better' without them.

"That isn't true, it shouldn't be true. We are powerful, and that's why they're afraid. They chuck us into this corner to suppress us, and the real reason the king wants me dead isn't for my powers."

With a voice that could command the attention of any room, he bared his soul. Though there were just the two of them, Alina could feel the world pressing closer. She could feel his anger casting out around them and roping in all of the unheard souls of the world uniting.

It was a dangerous realization, Alina knew, what he was saying.

And what made it the most dangerous was that he was speaking the truth.

"The king wants me dead because he knows we are stronger than him, and that we have every right to claim our place as equals among him. We are worth—" he clenched his teeth, pointing east, "—just as much as any of them, more even, and they don't like it. That terrifies him.

"Killing the king won't change that, I see that now. But," he paused his pacing, placed his hands behind his back and stared at the ground beneath his feet, thoughts far away. He looked again like the image she had on him in her mind: resolute, unmoving. "I know I can do something to change the world's perception of us. And if making them confront their fear of us is the way to do it, then I will show them that."

Alina sighed. This is where he always lost her.

"Fear is not the way to win over Ravka," she said. She reached down and began untying her shoes, desperate for them to see some fresh air; all the while, she tried to change his stubborn mind. "I've known fear, I lived it. I grew up in an orphanage where every day you could wake up with a knife held to your throat by deranged children with nothing to lose. Do you see me lining up to go back to that hell? Do you know what I learned from that place?"

Alina took her foot out of her shoe and rolled her ankle around, then massaged the joints and the balls of her feet.

"I learned never to turn my back against anyone or trust a soul outside my own. I sleep with one eye open—" Alina made a sound of exasperation.

“All important lessons,” Aleksander said, stepping back toward the single boulder nearby.

Alina made a sound of exasperation. “These are not normal lessons. These taught me—”

A snap of movement behind Aleksander caused Alina to jump immediately. Without thinking twice, she threw forward her hands and used her light to form a shield at his back.

An angry hiss sounded, and Alina’s heart clamored in her throat when she saw a viper with fangs the size of her little finger forming himself into a tight ball and readying to strike again. Aleksander had whipped around at her first motion, and while she held the shield, Aleksander made quick work of the snake with his shadows, slicing it neatly in half.

Alina cringed at the sight of the head flapping around; its nerves and tendons reacted to the change from life into death. Both of them stepped backward, staring at the snake’s black and gray corpse before them.

Aleksander cut his eyes toward Alina. She wrinkled her nose as the snake finally breathed its last, then settled her eyes on the Shadow Summoner’s face.

“Well that’s dinner,” he said.

If for a moment she’d thought he was joking, she was dissuaded of the notion the moment he reached out to grab the dead snake and tie it to his hip.

She widened her eyes in distaste; he shrugged his shoulders.

They marched on.

He allowed them to make a fire that night to cook the meat, using a flint to spark the flame. As they chewed the tough meat, Aleksander said the words she’d never thought she’d hear.

“That’s twice you’ve saved my life,” he said to her. “Thank you.”

Alina froze in shock. She swallowed the bite she was chewing, and watched him over the tops of the flames of their fire. He had the most earnest expression, and she never failed to recognize the beauty of it. Aleksander had the face of an angel, the command of a lesser god. She wondered why he bothered to be so manipulative at times; she wondered how long it had taken him to learn that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

But then, he could be manipulating her now.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, nodding to him. “You’ve saved mine twice. I suppose we’re even.”

“When should we stop counting?”

Alina scoffed. “Eight times saved,” she answered. “How’s that sound?”

Aleksander gave her a half smile. “Eight times it is then.”

That night, when Alina began to doze off, it occurred to her that was twice she'd failed her mission now. She'd been sent back to kill him, and she was failing miserably. Perhaps it wasn't in her nature to kill, she thought, perhaps she was simply a coward.

Perhaps, said a voice in the back of her mind, you just can't kill *him.*

Alina shook off the thought, but it pestered her until morning.

They made quick work of their camp and set out. It was their third day of travel, and Alina was nearly as strong as she'd been when she'd journeyed back into time, if a little sore from all of the walking they'd been doing lately. She swatted the gnats around her as they neared and passed a placid pond, feeling dazed and distracted by the last afternoon's events.

He wasn't the same, she realized. He wasn't as jaded, he wasn't as...Alina twitched her lips into a blink-and-you-miss-it smile before wrinkling her brow in thought. "Evil" was the word that had come to mind, but that didn't quite nail it on the head. No, he wasn't as…

Empty. That was the word she'd felt in her gut.

His attempts to simply speak his mind to her, rather than compel or push her, could almost even be genuine, she thought with a strange kind of distaste in her mouth. How could it be, she thought, that she was feeling sympathy for this devil?

Hadn't this been the man who'd taken advantage of her, corrupted her power? He'd tried to kill her best friend multiple times, Saints, he'd tried to kill them all multiple times.

This was the man who was so convinced of his own mission, he began killing the same Grisha he had sworn to protect, just for disobeying him. How could she forget that now? Why wasn't she taking that letter opener and plunging it into his heart at this very moment?

It was because, she knew with a sinking feeling, he *had* a heart.

She then decided on something.

She stopped in her tracks. After taking a few steps, Aleksander halted in front of her. He turned back to her, a question in his eye; perhaps she even saw a note of worry there.

She spoke slowly, trying to capture every word as she slotted them into place. "I cannot promise to help you," she said. She raised her chin, set her shoulders back defiantly. "But I will not stop you."

Aleksander's eyes narrowed. He could feel her resolving something much larger than the meaning her words carried, but he said nothing in response, simply waited for her to finish.

"I will go with you to see the king. I won't get in your way," she said, giving a small nod to tell him she'd finished.

He smiled at her. The forest around them seemed to breathe, and Aleksander took another step, softer this time, making sure to keep pace with her steps.

Alina walked beside him, setting her speed in time with his. In the many months Alina had been a Grisha, she had kept her old lessons as an orphan and morphed them with the new lessons. Genya’s betrayal, Baghra’s callousness, the Darkling’s abuse, all of it had taught her one thing: that she had a heart worth keeping, but it was also worth guarding.

She would remember who she was: an orphan from Keramzin who had survived only because of the love of her best friend, a Grisha who could summon the sun only because she had grown into an independent soul. She had the strength of the stag within her bones, telling her every day that because of her compassion, because of her patience, he had chosen her over anyone else.

And that is who she wanted to be. She would keep her heart, her compassion, her patience.

But she would not be fooled again.

If you step out of line, she continued in her mind as she matched his stride, *if you make one wrong move, I will kill you.*

And I won’t be sorry for it.

Give, and Be Given

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alina had never been the most astute learner at the orphanage, and that hadn't changed when she'd come to the Little Palace.

David had her studying for hours now, and she had to find new and innovative ways of keeping her attention to the texts he demanded she learn. Old Ravkan, while she could understand it well enough, was a different beast to master reading.

Worst of all, she couldn't sound out the words as she normally did. The Old Ravkan David had her learn were old merzost spells—one incorrect pronunciation might have her skin melting off her body.

"Not until you're ready," he told her, finger hovering over another passage for her to read. Alina groaned and held her eyelids open, trying and failing to read the swimming text in front of her.

She was impatient—their idea was sound enough, but the preparation they insisted she make seemed ridiculous. What else did she need to go back in time? A little spell, a knife to kill the Darkling? How hard could it all be anyway?

But Alina held her tongue and studied. She trusted David enough, knew him well enough that she was certain he knew what he was doing.

But that didn't mean she had to like it.

Finally when Alina had finished a particularly large tome, David looked at her with a keen eye.

"This one," he said, pointing to a small passage from a new text. Alina began to read silently when David shook his head. "Out loud."

Alina tilted her chin at him, silently checking if he was certain. He nodded.

She began to read out loud, "I call on the light to transform; awaken from repose, do not reflect, become."

Her hands itched. Alina brought them forward, calling to her light, which rippled like water, transforming into…

Alina gasped. "How is this possible?"

David's small smile spread over his face. "I'm sure you would have been able to do this eventually; color is, after all, only fragments of light."

Before them both, captured in Alina's palms, were an assortment of colors twisting and sparkling like a living rainbow. Alina tilted her hands and the colors transformed into cool blues and violets. She closed them and red spiraled out, as though she were cupping a flame to her chest.

She and David laughed in their joy, and Alina raised her hands and arched the colors over them both, shining them onto every surface.

It was beautiful, and it was creation in its truest form.

They smelled the smoke before they saw it.

Aleksander gave her the briefest of looks before Alina hiked up her dress and ran toward the smell. The smoke curled above them, so much grayer and less welcoming than Aleksander's shadows had become. It spread across the sky like a forbidding cloud, and when Alina finally felt the heat from the fire, her heart sped up in horror and panic.

Embers from a farmhouse flicked her face, and Alina's chest ached when she beheld the carnage before her.

What was once a tall, proud farmhouse was now a splintered husk, a shell of a home. The fire had burned out, perhaps even hours before they reached it. A few small items had somehow escaped the flames: a book, a full mattress, a necklace. But Alina had to cover her hand over her mouth at the stench of burned bodies.

There was no evidence of the humans who had died, but the smell was enough to tell Alina there had been more than one.

Aleksander reached out unconsciously, gripping her hand tightly in his own. They looked at each other once, then spread out, carefully checking to see if those who had burned the home had stayed around. Alina walked quietly through the woods, her steps light and cautious.

It was when she reached the back of the house she was unable to stop herself from coughing; she held her hand over her mouth, stifling the noise. Tears flooded her eyes from the smoke, which was careening toward the back of the house alongside a gust of wind. The wind blew more embers into her face and Alina shielded her eyes.

Then a vice clamped around her heart, halting her in her tracks.

Alina stopped breathing; red blood dripped down her nose, crossing to her lips and spreading across her tongue, a salty, metallic taste. She clutched her fingers into her chest and fell to her knees, trying desperately and instinctively to restart her heart. She could feel her blood slowing to a halt, her vision expanded and whirled around her.

Her head pulsed with the lack of blood and she fell to the ground, rolling, arching her back, anything to get her heart pumping again, but it was no use.

A heartrender dropped down from a tree and focused his attention only on her. His hands clumped together and Alina had never noticed it before, how severe a person's face could appear behind hands woven together to kill. The dusk of approaching night, the blackness that peered in the edges of her vision, it all came together and it reminded her of the Fold. *You're just a silly little girl*, her memory taunted her, *silly little girl...*

Alina's vision swam, but she stared at the heartrender, reaching out her spare hand to reassure him. *I'm one of you,* she wanted to say, but she could only cough pitifully, more blood spurting from her nose as she did so.

A boom sounded to her left and she could feel rather than see Aleksander erupting from the trees, using his shadows to knock the heartrender onto his back. Alina's heart was released and ran free to catch up on the life she had almost lost. She gasped for breath, yet heaved herself up with strength she didn't know she had.

She held out her hands again, clenching Aleksander's shoulder while he had one foot stamped into the heartrender's now broken hand, and used his shadows to blind his vision.

"Wait!" she gasped, her voice raspy from her lack of oxygen. "Wait!"

The heartrender below them was still and silent, but his panting breath raised and lowered his chest with startling speed. He knew what the shadows meant—which meant he knew exactly who Aleksander was.

"Please," she said, "we didn't do this. How can we help you?"

The heartrender said nothing, only the tension in his visible hand, pinned to the forest floor with another shadow, warned her to be suspicious.

She turned to Aleksander, still trying to catch her breath. "There's another one, a squaller."

"Find him, but do nothing, I'll take care of it."

Alina wiped the blood from her nose and mouth and rolled her eyes. "I can take care of him myself."

"In your condition?"

"I'm winded, not pregnant," she retorted, and left before he could respond.

Based on the south easterly wind, she estimated the squaller was on the northern side of the house. She ran along the curve of the burned house, and when she narrowly missed a gust of wind, she aimed her hands up to arch her light into the trees. The sound of a thump followed, and Alina launched herself at the body on the ground, pulling the squaller's hands behind their back.

She hauled them toward the heartrender, pulling them to sit side by side. Aleksander motioned with his hands, and just like that, the shadows blossomed and curled around the squaller's face, just like the heartrender’s.

With both of them blinded, Aleksander began questioning them.

Alina’s heart broke with every answer they gave. The home had belonged to a small farming family with an individual plot. They had been Grisha, yet despite keeping to themselves, the village had offered anyone a reward for their disappearance, no questions asked.

These two Grisha, alongside an inferni, had escaped from their own unwelcoming villages. The black dust that had earlier been heaping flames settled around Alina and Aleksander’s feet. There were no birds, no other animals nearby, only the sound of the heartrender’s soft voice laying out the atrocities they’d committed to their own people for a bit of coin.

Alina wondered if they’d been happy to do it, or if they felt any guilt at all. Something small slithered in her stomach, and Alina thought about the viper from the day before. It felt like it had nestled there, in the pit of her gut, and it was shivering, shivering….

This was a whole new king of anger Alina had never experienced before.

Their inferni had been killed by the Grisha mother, but not before the flames took the family, before the heartrender had kept them in place and the squaller had kicked up the winds to fan the flames.

Aleksander’s eyes pierced through them like daggers, and Alina knew he was moments from twitching his hand to call upon the shadows to make quick work of these Grisha like he had their snake. Alina captured his wrist with her fingers and shook her head.

Violence begat more violence, and Alina had seen enough today. With the only rope they had, Alina and Aleksander tied the two to a nearby tree. Aleksander, in his anger, broke the squaller’s hand as well, and Alina didn’t stop him. She hated the feeling in her stomach that relished in the crunching sound, that cruel appeal to her sense of justice. Perhaps they didn’t deserve her sympathy, but even Alina knew in her own corrupted heart that delighting in their pain was exactly the path they had once taken.

They left them there to fend for themselves, and if they heard a grey wolf howling in the night, neither of them necessarily worried about it.

The thought of the Grisha children burning alive in the flames had hardened Alina and Aleksander’s hearts against their murderers.

That night around the fire, Alina and Aleksander didn’t sit on opposite sides. They sat beside each other, with a comfortable amount of space still between them. Their shadows created by the flickering light touched and overlapped on the ground.

Aleksander clenched his fist, snapping a twig between his fingers. “Your light,” he said. “You can use it as a shield.”

Alina nodded.

“I’ve never thought to do that.”

Alina scratched her wrist, then ran her fingertips along the sides of the fingers on her other hand. She grazed the skin lightly, and the sensation brought Genya to her mind. She could almost feel her friend moving a strand of her hair into place.

“It's mostly instinct,” Alina said softly. “If I use it in any other way, it’s more difficult to manage. I can hold the light, and I can use it to protect. But attacking another person," she paused. She swallowed and her throat felt raw. "It takes more out of me. It’s draining.”

Alina called some of her light into her palm, unable to look into the fire anymore. She still felt too undone. Alina turned her palm over; the small ball of light she created ebbed and flowed, bobbing like a toy on the water. She looked deeply into it, and she could see the yellow that shone, the blue at the edges of the circle. She smiled, and ignored the tears that pooled at her lashes.

Aleksander reached out and touched the outer portion of the light, as if trying to capture it for himself. The ball of light receded, and she could see his disappointment reflected in his face.

“I don’t know if my shadows can protect,” he said, “I was never taught to do that.”

Alina dimmed the light, then dropped her hand. She stared at him: at the frowning, serious lips, at his focused, bitter eyes. Alina reached out and touched his chin with her fingertips, lifting his gaze up to her.

It was there again. That trace of hope.

“I can teach you,” she said. She didn’t know if it was true, if she really could. But she had made her decision to follow him to Os Alta, to give him a chance to redeem himself, and the only way that might happen is if she helped him along and showed him how to walk that path.

Aleksander’s dark eyes reflected the fire. The heat of the flames, Alina’s broken heart, the feel of Aleksander’s scruff against the tips of her fingers—it was overwhelming for a moment. The urge to wrap him in her arms and take comfort after what they’d just seen, the force of it was nearly painful.

Her fingertips were just inches from those lips, ones she had once had. She remembered the thrill of that winter fete, the feel of his hands on her face, pulling her into him. Her stomach fluttered when he had pressed his smile against her own, when he had rushed back to her for one final kiss before being called away, before inevitably she learned everything...

Alina jerked her hand back into her coat and wrapped it tighter around herself. She looked back into those horrible flames, and turned away from him.

“Good night, Aleksander.” She brought out her blanket and moved to the other side of the fire.

Aleksander remained where he was, and if she could feel his eyes on her back, she chose to ignore it.

* * *

They were about halfway to Os Alta, which gave them another week until they arrived before the king. It didn’t give Aleksander long to come up with a plan, but Alina wasn’t going to help him, so it didn’t entirely bother her anyway. However, a week also wasn’t a lot of time to train him to use his abilities for protection; assuming Alina was even able to explain how she used her light to shield anyway.

They walked all day, staying close to each other as they moved through the woods, closer than they had been before. If Aleksander’s hand brushed hers as they walked between the trees, if their coats overlapped and fluttered against each other in the wind, neither of them noticed it. The other had become as natural as the ground, the sun, the sky.

They decided to train at night, when Aleksander’s shadows would be all but unnoticeable. Alina felt strangely nervous when Aleksander put out the fire, when he sat across from her, hands up and ready to work. Alina cleared her throat, and tried to remember how Baghra trained her.

Then she immediately dispelled the thought. Not only would that be a horrible idea and possibly tip off Aleksander that she knew his mother, it also wouldn’t be very helpful in this case. If Baghra had been able to teach Aleksander how to use his powers to protect, wouldn’t she have already? Baghra was a bully, which was effective for amplification, but Alina didn’t need Aleksander to amplify his gift, she needed him to focus it.

“Tell me,” Alina asked. “Who was Luda to you?”

Aleksander’s eyes widened, surprised at the question. He blinked, confused, opening his mouth, closing it, opening it again, “Why are you asking me this?”

“Just answer the question.” She needed him to think of the person he loved most deeply, think about whom he wanted to protect. That must have been Luda, and she needed him to think of her now.

“She…” he swallowed. “I cared for her.”

Silence.

“What, that’s all?” Alina asked, almost annoyed. He’d been devastated when she’d seen him holding her, that look in his eye had been no lie. “You loved her, didn’t you?”

Aleksander’s brow furrowed. “I don’t think I’m capable of love.”

Alina sat up, ramrod straight. Her heart felt frozen, like a sudden iceberg had lodged itself in the middle of her chest. Was this a manipulation? A ploy for sympathy?

But if so, why? She licked her lips, determined not to be manipulated—if he wanted to play this game, she would match him, beat for beat.

“Why do you think this?”

“I’ve never loved anyone.”

“How can you be incapable of love, or know you haven’t loved, without knowing what it feels like? What—” Alina cleared her throat, “what do you think love is?”

“It’s sacrificing everything for someone,” he answered, like a recitation. “It’s caring for someone else more than you care for yourself. I cared for Luda, I *did*,” he said. “But I wouldn’t have given up everything for her. I didn’t, when I had the chance.”

He closed his eyes for a moment harshly, then pressed the heels of his palms against them. “If those things are love, then I have not loved anything except my people.”

Alina watched his face in the moonlight. His unshaven face looked wretched, unwashed and full of despair. She thought about how he had continued to think these things through the centuries, years and years before they’d ever met. She didn’t doubt then, that there had been nothing she could have done to save him.

To have told himself he was a monster incapable of love for hundreds of years, it would have been impossible to change his heart and mind.

But here and now, she stood a chance.

“Love,” Alina said quietly, “is many things.”

She thought about her friends, her family, so far ahead in the future. Zoya and her honesty, David and his dedication. Nadia and her humor, Tamar and Tolya and their undying loyalty. Nikolai and his faith. Genya and her kindness. Mal...

“It’s feeling safe with someone. It’s a warmth in your chest. It’s a feeling of relief, knowing someone will listen to you complain but not turn away. Love, it—”

Mal, and his dramatic turnaround, his cruel stomping on her esteem whenever she made decisions about anything. Mal and his unbelievable patience with her. His constant nagging at her to show her she could be better. Mal, her brother in life, her brother in arms.

“Loving someone, it’s not easy. People do stupid things, they hurt you, they want things from you. But love is a place, and you can choose to be there. It’s where you choose to be.

“Where do you return, Aleksander? When everything goes wrong, who do you turn to?”

Aleksander thought peacefully. A cloud passed over the moon, surrounding them in complete darkness, Alina could barely make out his features in the deep night.

He raised his hands, pulling the darkness into them, circling the shadows around his hands, around and around. They fluttered like wings of a butterfly, coming and going, caressing the space between them.

“Think about them. You are not sacrificing for them. You are just giving to them. Give them your hopes for them with no expectations. Give them your time, your patience. You are not something that can be cut up and portioned out; you’re an ocean, and when you think you’ve given up too much, the rain will fall. Give, and be given.

“That is love.”

Shadows soared around them, but it did not rush. It was calm, precious, and it flowed through the forest like water over pebbles. They felt different, his shadows: they were tangible and focused, and Aleksander lifted his hands, spread them wide, almost like he was preparing to use the Cut.

She nearly flinched, but the shadows rolled and formed themselves into a curtain around them. Completely shut off from the forest around them, Alina and Aleksander sat in the center of the shadows while the sky remained open above them. The starlit night shone on the pair and Alina lifted her hand to grab that light.

She opened her palms and illuminated their circle, white starlight blossoming from her cupped hands.

Across from her, Aleksander smiled.

They stayed that way only for a couple minutes more, though it felt like the entire night. Neither said a word to each other when they withdrew their powers. They simply lay down on the forest floor, with the night calling around them, and fell asleep immediately into deep, dreamless sleeps.

Chapter End Notes

fuck it i'm just gonna dump it all at once. party on dudes!

Show Me Who You Are

With things going so well, it was only a matter of time before their luck ran dry and the tables turned.

Alina had not been getting enough sleep. She'd been tired, cranky, and no one had dared to call her out on her mood for fear of getting a snippy, sarcastic remark thrown at them in return. Even Zoya had avoided the Sun Summoner, holding her tongue and hardly daring to raise an eyebrow when Alina had tripped over her chair after getting up from breakfast.

Alina had been simmering since Mal had walked out on them, and that simmer was beginning to boil over.

Unfocused, Alina had been careless when her tongue tripped over a spell, and the merzost had pounced immediately.

Alina's light went searing hot and flames erupted from not only her palms, but anything direct light touched within the room.

That room had been the library.

Panicked, Alina slammed the book shut and screamed for help. Tamar and Tolya burst into the room, and Tolya immediately ran off to grab any tidemaker possible to help squelch the fire before the books were lost to the flames. Tamar, only a heartrender, grasped Alina and pulled her from her attempts to use her kefta to extinguish the fire.

David said nothing when he saw the final damage Alina had wrought. He merely walked up to her, hands in his hair, eyes wide and astonished. Half of the books were damaged, nearly one tenth were irrevocably destroyed.

Even Genya glared at Alina, unable to hide her anger for Alina's carelessness. One tenth of the books in the library, never to be recovered, their knowledge lost forever. Alina wanted to apologize, but it could never be enough.

A slip of the tongue had cost them a thousand books, Alina realized, what would happen if she misspoke an entire word?

For days and days she refused to practice merzost, convinced she would tear the world apart with her powers. She ate in her room, refusing company, all while the other Grisha cleaned the ashes from the bookshelves.

On the fourth day Alina didn't leave her room, Zoya entered her apartment, brown eyes unsympathetic, lips pulled into a thin line of disgust.

"So you're just going to sit here and feel sorry for yourself then? I always knew you were a waste of space. Didn't think you were this much of a quitter though."

Alina grit her teeth and didn't reply.

"So that's it? You'll just," Zoya shrugged her shoulders, "give up, crawl back to Mal, because that's all you care about." Alina's heartbeat sped up, anger tossing and roiling in her belly, but she refused to give Zoya the fight she wanted. "It really is, you know, all you ever cared about. That guy—don't get me wrong, handsome enough, but he's just a guy…

"You really make me sick." The venom in her voice finally made Alina look up at her best enemy. Zoya was livid. She wasn't playing Alina for jokes right then—she looked lke she wanted to kill Alina. Her fists were clenched the tell tale of a beginning breeze of a storm curled around her like a cloak. "All that power. For what? Who are you protecting in here, *Sun Summoner*?"

Zoya threw the word like a dagger, and Alina's heart was a burning ship, flaming and sinking at the same time.

"Go back to the orphanage, Alina," Zoya said. "Go back home, so the rest of us can ignore you and finally get something done."

The next day Alina was out in the training circle, surrounded by only dirt and rocks, where she insisted on training alone.

* * *

They began to fill their usual silence with stories during their walk.

Aleksander told her of the Grisha struggle, the ones she claimed she was largely unaware of due to her placement toward the south of Ravka. He told her...he told her of his past, too, though he was ashamed to admit it.

He'd never told anyone this, and she could tell from the discomfort on his face, the near anger, that she really was the first to be told his past.

The young girl, his first friend, who'd betrayed him. The young boy who'd also tried to take his bones for power. The first time he'd used the Cut, he admitted, he'd felt so powerful, fearless. He was twelve, and they had been children, too.

His mother had killed an entire village for him to keep that secret safe.

And they kept moving. They always moved; Aleksander learned to stop resenting his mother, and begin understanding her desire to keep him safe. They were the only two, you see, and being the one of the other meant something to them.

He told her that he'd searched for others. But he'd never found one who had the same powers as he did, never found anyone with the ability to summon.

Not before Alina.

Alina told him of her past, what she could. She told him she was an orphan, and she'd never met her parents. She'd grown up in Keramzin during a war against the country she was half-part of, or looked part of, anyway. She told him about the children who called her names, slurs, then began hurling worse things at her, fists and knives.

She didn't tell Aleksander about Mal, not directly. She told him she had a friend, closer than any other, who was waiting for her back home. But that was all.

This Aleksander might be willing to give up the secrets of his past to her, but she would choose to only tell him as much as she wished him to know.

"What were you doing then," Aleksander asked. "Before you came to us?"

"Cartographer, in the army."

Aleksander looked at her, perplexed. "How did they allow you—"

"I hid myself, you know that." Alina confessed. She blushed slightly, unsure why. She wasn't ashamed of hiding herself, she truly had not known she was Grisha. Different, certainly, but every ten-year-old with dead parents hoped and felt they were apart from others, so she hadn't paid much attention to it. "But I also didn't know I was Grisha. I didn't know until...until a few years ago. I suppressed my powers up until a few years ago."

"You never used your powers? For that long," Aleksander shook his head, horrifed. "How did you even survive?"

"What do you mean?"

"The small science, it feeds us, you must know this now. By not using your powers, for 17 years, it's like starving yourself of food and water. You would have died had you not begun to use them. Saints, if you had been anything but a summoner..."

Alina looked at her feet as they walked, ignoring the feeling in her stomach that echoed in feeling what he'd just said. Without practicing the small science, she would die. She had been ill, *so* ill, she remembered.

"What was the pain like?"

Alina stared at him, in perplexion, in surprise. No one had asked her that. Not even Mal. Certainly not the Darkling, as he was centuries from now. No one had asked how it had felt to suppress the strongest part of herself.

"It was horrible," she whispered. She began walking again, slower than before. He matched his steps to her, footsteps keeping in time. "It felt like my heart didn't beat. I'd never understood how people could jump and dance and sing like they did at those parties. I always had to sit down every few minutes, even as a child. I'd never had that energy they did. I always felt like an old woman watching from the sides. I never felt like I was one of them, not in the ways that mattered.

“I think I lost part of myself,” she said, hardly in control of the words that came out of her mouth now. “I think I’ll always be broken, and I’ll never be able to reach what I could have been.”

She blinked away sudden tears, wiping the water that striped down her cheeks. “Saints,” she laughed. “It's nothing really. It is what it is, nothing to be done about it now.”

Aleksander grabbed her hand and squeezed it, *hard*. “Starkov, you are not broken.”

Alina felt the warmth of his body bleed into her palm; it almost felt like a beam of light.

“You’re not alone anymore,” he said. “I can help you get what you’ve lost.”

Alina swallowed the tears that threatened to flow. She had been able to tell him the worst parts of her past, the most heinous cruelties she’d endured without a blink of her eyes. But hearing from him how she could gain back pieces of herself she’d lost, hearing him believe it, it was almost more than she could bear.

“You’ve trained me,” he said, “let me train you. It's the least I can offer.”

Alina smiled, wiping her nose. “I did save your life about three times.”

“I’ve saved yours the same,” he said, not indefensibly.

She snorted. “I could have taken that heartrender.”

“I could have taken that squaller.”

Alina couldn’t help the small laugh bursting from her mouth; it felt like bath bubbles popping. Saints, she needed a bath, that reminded her. Alina grimaced and turned over her dirty hands. She sniffed her coat and nearly retched. It hadn't been since the cottage in the wood they'd been able to wash. After their run in with the two Grisha at the barn, she’d also accumulated smoke, ash, blood…

“Is there any chance we can stop for a wash up?” Alina then begged. She saw Aleksander begin to frown and she stopped him before he could open his mouth.

“We’ve been walking so long, we’ll nearly be in Os Alta. We haven’t run into any soldiers—we’re due to a short rest. Please, just a day to wash ourselves and our clothes. Besides—” she said quickly, trampling his objections, “what king would accept us two beggars into his palace? We ought to at least not smell like barn animals.”

Aleksander frowned. “We don’t smell like barn animals.”

Alina lifted an eyebrow. “Speak for yourself,” then she covered her nose, “Or don’t.”

Aleksander paused, wrinkled his nose, probably trying to discreetly smell himself, Alina thought with a grin.

“Fine,” he permitted. “But we take only half a day. We walk until noon and I’ll train you in the Cut. Then we can wash up, dry our clothes at night, and be ready for the morning.”

Alina made no objections.

Unlike Aleksander, Alina was not an ideal student. His attempts to have her use the Cut—in midday, as he’d suggested, when the light was bright and her powers would be less noticeable—were valiant, but Alina’s impatience and inability to focus got them nowhere.

“You aren’t using your anger to channel the Cut, it’s no emotion you can cling to,” he told her, angling her hands toward the tops of the trees. “It’s the confidence within yourself you need—that will channel your Cut.”

Alina groaned. “Confidence in what?”

“In yourself, your light. Has the light ever failed you?”

The sun shone above them, as constant as the night. *No,* she thought to herself. *But I have.*

Alina threw up her hands at her last failed attempt. “This is pointless. We’re losing the day. Let’s just bathe and try again tomorrow.”

Aleksander sighed and rolled his eyes, fed up. “Fine, there’s the river,” he pointed her to the cool, welcoming water. “I’ll wash downstream, let’s just, keep within earshot of each other.”

Alina nearly skipped to the stream. “Nothing will happen, we haven’t seen a soul for days.”

Aleksander didn’t answer her, just walked off to his own area to bathe, hiding from her sight with some conveniently grouped trees and a bend in the river.

Alina whistled to herself pleasantly as she dropped her bag near the river and laid out her blanket. They’d previously agreed on taking the whole afternoon, and she had every intention of making the most of it.

She began to remove her clothes and unbind her hair, letting it drop to her shoulders and back. She had gathered a few roots and herbs to scrub herself with, alongside the meager leftovers of the soap that remained; she was even able to find a few eucalyptus leaves to make up a shampoo to wash her hair out and leave it smelling pleasant for a change. She laid out the bone-tooth comb she’d grabbed from Luda’s cottage. She’d felt mildly guilty for it, but the object had clearly had an expert hand, and Alina couldn’t help the child in her that still liked to knick things she found beautiful. She only used it when Aleksander wasn’t around to see it, and now was the perfect opportunity to really give her hair the proper brushing it needed.

Alina couldn’t stop smiling, even when she plunged into the shiveringly cold water up to her neck. She began to scrub vigorously and happily, teeth chattering and skin breaking out into gooseflesh.

Eventually, when she grew accustomed to the cool water, she dipped her head underneath and began to wash out her tangled, dirty hair. It was exactly as bad as she’d thought—even in the moving water she could see the ash and dirt being trailing away from her down stream. She scrubbed her scalp twice for good measure, and finally went at it a third time, just for satisfaction. She then just rested in the water, remaining until she was pruny and fully, wonderfully clean.

Checking she was still unable to be seen by Aleksander, she laid out on her blanket and enjoyed the sunlight on her naked body.

She closed her eyes and listened to the light—it had a sound. Most people didn’t know about it. It was a high-pitched noise, but it bounced and bubbled; sometimes it sounded like someone talking underwater, if she could describe it as anything at all. It gave her comfort to listen to it in the late summer afternoons, and thought it was fall, nearing winter, with the light singing in her ears, she could imagine she was home just at the end of spring.

A small rustle sounded behind her and Alina jumped, startling at the sound.

She turned to see a small rabbit, bouncing behind her and nibbling on some herbs. Alina smiled, nearly licking her lips when she thought to herself that they could use some meat for dinner. She turned herself over and, after giving it a moment’s pause, brandished her light in a sudden flare, aiming for the rabbit.

Her failed attempt at using the Cut only resulted in the rabbit scurrying away. Alina blew the strand of hair that had fallen into her face out of her eyes; she turned back over and continued to sunbathe.

Another rustle, and Alina ignored it. It sounded farther away—just the rabbit making its way downstream, she told herself.

But then she heard a stomp, and that, she knew instinctively, ears perking and adrenaline spiking, was no rabbit.

Alina threw herself to the left, dodging the arrow that was aimed for her just in time. Naked and terrified, Alina ducked into a crouch behind a nearby rock and looked to see who was aiming for her.

Two soldiers, one carried Aleksander—handcuffed with a stick between his wrists to keep him from using his shadows, a gag in his mouth, and a nasty, bleeding cut on his head—the other pointed a crossbow straight at her head.

Knowing the rock wasn’t large enough to shelter her from another arrow, Alina ran for the cover of trees, hiding herself behind a large pine.

“Stop, Grisha!” shouted the soldier. “Give yourself up and we won’t kill you.”

Alina had never in her life been so, *so fucking furious*. After this, she thought miserably to herself, Aleksander would never let them stop to bathe again.

Alina clapped her hands together and turned just enough to throw a beam of light at the soldiers. Aleksander was on the ground now, another bow pointed at the back of his head, while the other soldier aimed another shot at her the same time she threw her light at him.

The arrow wisped past her, narrowly slicing her arm before she had ducked back behind the tree. Another second off and it would have gone right through her shoulder.

"Come on out," said the soldier, "or we'll kill him."

"Don't!" Alina shouted.

"Come out, sugar tits, or we put an arrow straight in his brain."

"All right," Alina shouted back, pressing her back against the tree. She saw no way out of this. Alina wasn't prepared for a fight. Aleksander was tied. They were both naked. Could things possibly get any worse?

"Okay," Alina shouted from behind the tree. "I'm coming. I'm coming out now."

She heard Aleksander say something, though his voice muffled from the gag. She paid him no mind. Instead, Alina rolled her eyes and steeled her nerves. She inhaled deeply, and exhaled with patience. She exhaled without fear, with confidence.

Confidence; what was it? It was the absence of the ego, a complete and utter detachment from what any one is capable of, with only a clear line of what must be done, and knowing you are the only person with the ability to make the choice to do it. Confidence thought beyond failure, beyond success. Confidence was in her hands alone.

And there was only one thing left to do.

Alina came out with her hands up.

Alina walked slowly up to them, noticing how their distracted eyes flicked from her breasts to her parts below, and she stared at them with her hands up and apart.

"Get over here," the soldier called, the one pointing his crossbow at her.

"I'm coming, I just don't want you to accidently shoot my face in. Stop clenching the trigger, you moron."

"Just get over here," he said. The heat in his face was leeching down toward his neck, and Alina could imagine it spreading to other places. She could see the look in his eyes, the one that made her want to run and hide, the one that made her want to scream because she knew what would happen if she reached them across the divide.

The crossbow pointing to the back of Aleksander's head was the only thing that made her put one foot ahead of the other. It was the only thing that made her continue forward.

Alina paused then, several steps away. She was grateful, for that moment, that Aleksander could see nothing but her feet.

“I’m right here now,” she said, hands still above her head. “Let him go.”

The soldier pressed the butt of his crossbow into his shoulder, turning his eye to match with the sight at the tip of the weapon. He pointed it down, aiming for her leg.

He grinned.

“Not yet, honey,” he said, and Alina growled.

She had thought she might give them a chance.

Without a single breath more she threw her hands together and a resounding clap boomed along the riverbed. The sound of thunder broke loose and light spliced from Alina’s hands straight across from her, Cutting straight into the middle of the two soldiers.

A moment lasted a lifetime while everything held in a deep silence prevailing that soft afternoon. For a moment, it lifted, and Alina could hear the birds singing, she could hear the light singing, and the life that moved around them.

The two torsos of the soldiers fell to the ground, crossbows clattering to the forest floor. Their legs toppled shortly after.

For the first time, Alina had used the Cut. Against two soldiers. Beside the river.

A cold, deeper than that of the river, settled into her bones, and she wrapped her arms around her. She ran past Aleksander for the moment, suddenly horrified at her nakedness. She threw a blanket around herself then gathered one of their knives. She came back and cut the rope that bound him.

He sat up, as silent as she. His eyes spoke all the words she needed to hear.

Aleksander grasped her hands, holding them before him.

“What did you feel?” he asked her. Did he say that out loud?

“I felt,” Alina swallowed. She watched him hold her hands so gently, like he was holding a softly burning candle. “Powerful.”

“I know,” he said, and then rose, never letting go over her hands.

They stood for a moment, Alina shaking with her blanket around her, Aleksander standing before her, as naked as she felt.

“We can’t stay here,” he said, and she knew that. She nodded, finally staring back into his face.

A sob broke from her chest, like a scream.

He held her fast, clutching her and shaking nearly as violently as she. He wasn't shaking because of the soldiers, not their near death just then. She knew, because that's not why she was shaking and crying either.

They were both lost, weren't they? Just lost little orphans, so far from home, experiencing power and hate for the first time, for the hundredth time, together.

The world was a cruel beast, and it would never stop trying to eat them alive. But as Alina trembled in the shelter of his arms, as she held him between her own, they each felt something else beneath the stunning horror they'd each experienced.

They felt, for the first time, like they finally knew what it was like not to be alone. They knew what it was like to have someone else feel the same broken way they did. Terrified, yet fearless. Powerless, yet powerful.

Alina finally let him go and began to turn away. Before she could part, Aleksander pressed his fingers gently against her cheeks, running over them and wiping her tears away. She looked at his face, and she found herself wiping away tears of his own.

They gathered their things, took what they could scavenge from the soldiers, and then threw their carcasses in the water.

And just like with the inferni and the squaller, they didn't look back, or hardly care.

* * *

Looking back on that memory, years later, Alina would realize that had been the moment she would forever be unable to detach herself from Aleksander. The bond they shared had been close, even as strangers, but her use of the Cut with him, from him, for him, had changed her resolutely.

And in only three days, she would forget all of it.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Chapter Notes

oh shit HERE WE GO

also, warning for depictions of sexism and racism

Abdyl had taken the wood from a tree as old as his lineage, more than a thousand years old. It was an old white birch, ancient and tall, and when it crashed to the forest floor, it sighed in relief. Its soft wood bent easily in his hands, snapping under his attention. Carefully, he cut the branch into smaller pieces, whittling them down to the size of his fingers. He etched the runes into their bodies, singing under his breath as he did so. The bark bent under his will, and he could feel the spirit of the tree giving part of itself to him, to their new work they would accomplish together.

The seer looked into the stars, and he saw the light reflecting into the shadows the cuts of the wood made, marking small indentations and curves along the spoken language only he knew. She hadn't come yet, but he was preparing for her arrival.

At night, the path was clear, and Abdyl would cast the lots on the ground and read their answers with the light of the moon. It was shaky, her future, and she would need all of the strength of her heart to carry her through the years ahead of her.

When she arrived with her entourage at the end of spring, when the sun began its final ascent into the highest part of the sky, he could see the damage the separation from her partner wrought. Abdyl knew that heat needed rain, stone needed tools, and light, well.

“Light is half a companion,” he told the Sun Summoner seated before him, disguised in rags. She nodded respectfully, if dubiously. He could see the seed of doubt in her eye; this would do her no good.

She finished her coffee and slid the small cup across the table toward him. He smiled at her, knowing she'd been told he would look into the dregs of her cup and tell her the future before her, behind her. He only watched her, seeing, in the back of his mind, what lots were cast from the ancient birch.

“You are planning a journey alone, but you will not be alone. I know—” he said, raising a hand though she had said nothing. He could hear her thoughts as plain as day, as though she were a bird in his window calling for morning. “You think you are always alone. How wrong you are.”

“I'm often told that,” she muttered. “How wrong I am.”

Abdyl smiled. “You are young. Of course you are.” He reached across the table and held out his hand. Eyes flicking from his palms to his face, the Sun Summoner hesitantly reached out, and delicately placed her hand palm-down, facing his. With barely the touch of skin, her light shone from her skin, illuminating his tent for a split second.

She whipped back her hand. “You are an amplifier?” she asked, voice sharp, afraid. “How?”

“There are so many of us, Sol Koroleva,” Abdyl smiled at her. “If only you are willing to see.”

As they neared the capital, Alina and Aleksander began to see small villages crop up in the woods. In the interest of haste, and knowing they would be here on exposed to the public, they began to use the main roads and leave their forest behind.

Alina couldn’t help but mourn the end of their journey in those woods. Aleksander grasped her hands tightly, squeezing when Alina gazed back on the copse of trees growing ever farther and farther away. They’d barely made it out of there alive; she should be grateful to be leaving.

But that tug of loneliness and dread pulled at her ever so slightly when it dawned on her that she would be going home soon. So long as Aleksander proved his attempt at change, Alina would leave him be and let the cards lay where they were. She would go back to the future still as much of herself as she’d been when she left….Wouldn’t she?

A small voice in her heart questioned her; *the seer*, it called to her. What had he told her?

She shook out her head, gripping her packed shawl over her ears—how the cold had come in fast—and squeezed Aleksander’s hand in return.

His plan was simple: disguise themselves as guards, enter the king’s library, and wait for him there. Aleksander only needed Alina present, he said, a willingness from her not to interfere with his plea to the king.

“He’s erratic, but I can control him,” he said, “This should be no trouble, Starkov.”

Alina wasn’t so sure, but she nodded all the same.

Alina would be unfamiliar to the king already, so she only needed a guard’s uniform to sneak in. They’d stolen the pants, buckles and boots from the soldiers...from before, but their jackets had been beyond repair. It was easy enough to steal them. Alina and Aleksander had entered a bar and waited until nightfall. A group of raucous soldiers entered with clean cut lines, hats and jokes on the edges of their tongues. By the end of the night, they had been so stumbling drunk, it’d been the easiest thing thus far to simply grab a coat each and head out the door.

Alina almost smiled. After one of the soldiers had made a crass comment about her "exotic" face, her "compelling silence," Alina didn't feel a twinge of guilt for stealing some rubles from his wallet as well as his coat.

The next day they supplied themselves with things they might need, and Alina even purchased a few items that were more wanted than needed. A piece of fruit, perfumed oil. Aleksander bought only one item.

On the very edge of the city, with the looming, egregiously opulent palace in sight, Aleksander handed Alina the pair of scissors he'd bought, and asked her to cut his hair.

He held still while she loosened the tie at the nape of his neck and ran her fingers through his hair. She took out the bone-tooth comb and began to brush it out. His hair was still quite clean from their wash a few days before; he must have been able to wash it before the soldiers arrived. The teeth of the comb slid over his scalp, and Alina could hear his quiet, deep breaths while she worked.

His hair was so soft, she thought to herself absently, bringing her hand up to comb her fingers through his hair, parting it in several pieces. She held one lock between her index and middle fingers. She glanced at the side of his face, at the high cheekbone and left side of his jaw presented to her. His dark lashes lay against that cheek, feather soft, dark as night.

With a quick snip, Alina cut off the first lock of hair. Others followed, and Alina did her best to keep it as even as possible. She cut it as close to the back of his neck as she could, allowing hair from the front to keep some of its length.

She'd cut Mal's hair often enough, back in the orphanage, and when they had the same orders while in the army, so when she finished his cut, it didn't look entirely amateurish.

Perhaps one side was a bit longer than the other, but Alina simply used her fingers to brush it one way, try it another, and she found that with a little finessing, it looked just fine. It looked as though a lover or a wife had seen to his grooming, not unlike so many others living common lives in Ravka.

As a final thought, Alina took some of her oil and dipped some of it into her palm. She rubbed her hands together and used the oil over his hair, styling it to her purpose.

She could feel his eyes on her face, but she didn't return the gaze. She simply led her hands over his hair, letting her mind wander and think of the sun filtering through pines and birches, while dawn crept over from behind the palace.

"Starkov," he said quietly, hardly more than a whisper among the rising noise of a waking city. "Thank you."

She nodded, swallowing the feeling that lingered in the back of her throat.

He took one of her hands, still smelling of rosehips, the scent she liked for herself, and kissed the back of it delicately, softly.

Alina opened her mouth to say something when the bell tolled.

They both looked up and away, and that something between them quieted. He stood and began to put on the guard uniform a while Alina sat for a moment longer, staring at the rising, blood-red sun, hovering over the palace like an omen.

* * *

Alina pulled up the soldier’s pants, adding a belt to keep them from sliding down her legs. She noticed that despite their limited rations and the constant hiking, her legs were bulkier, stronger. She smiled to herself, admiring the angles and divots the muscles created. She’d had a tough time adjusting to the level of her powers after using merzost and going back into the past, but she’d certainly gotten stronger while she was here. Her powers were at least equal to what she’d been able to accomplish before her journey, perhaps stronger now with her additional ability to Cut.

She inhaled deeply, forcing her heart—which had sprung up like an excited hound at her mere thought of using the Cut—to calm down. She buttoned up the plain uniform, tucking the shirt into the pants after. The sun was still hovering over the edge of the city, and she was waiting for Aleksander to come back with the go-ahead. All they needed was to get inside the palace. For all that Aleksander was a brilliant general, his plans were never vastly complicated.

“Better to be flexible—whatever plan you make, anticipate it will go wrong,” he’d advised her. He wasn't wrong, she supposed, how many of *her* plans went according to plan? This one certainly hadn’t. Sure she’d gotten back and prevented the Fold from happening—for now—but she still had yet to fulfill the second part of her mission.

But in all honesty, she didn’t know what would come next.

The original idea had been simple: stop the Fold, kill the Darkling, go home. Yet Alina had been deep in enemy territory for weeks and she was conflicted about what to do next. If Aleksander followed through and simply met with the king, convinced him to reform the Second Army, then what? Would Alina leave him, and the rest of the world, to their chances? Assume that without the power of merzost, he might not be corrupted?

Another voice she refused to give the stage pressed forward, asking her if she should….if she should stay. Watch over him, ensure that he never planted his feet in the darkness. She could succeed where Baghra failed.

Alina pressed her hair back from her face, going through the motions of pulling it back into a low military knot. She was at least grateful that at this point in history there was no border war with Shu Han, at least now, and so her looks never received a second glance, not in the city, anyway—well, occasionally perhaps, but it was often men side-eyeing her with simpering little grins, asking her flirtatiously and in loud, butchered Ravkan “what a pretty girl like her was doing here.” Alina had ignored them all. She’d had to stop Aleksander a few times from challenging them, however.

She had been somewhat surprised to see him openly possessive. Usually he hid it under the surface, planned his revenge slowly and painfully. But then, he was four hundred years younger than she'd known him before. Perhaps his patience was a long-learned journey.

Alina searched around for a tie, finding none in her lap or around her. She dug into her bag with one hand, coming up with nothing. She sighed and grumbled. While normally she was one to keep to her own things, they had been journeying long enough, so she decided to search a few pockets from Aleksander's knapsack. He'd used one often enough for his own hair before she'd cut it that morning—surely he had one.

Alina dipped her hand into the dark bag, feeling around the various unknown objects, searching for that small piece of cloth for her hair. Her hand paused when she found a leather tie, strapped around a book. She grabbed the book from its depths and brought it to the surface, planning to take the string and put it back. But when Alina saw the book, its old, damaged edges, its worn and weary paper, she recognized it immediately.

It was the very same journal she'd found that contained the spell of merzost, the one used to create the Fold.

Alina's breath stopped in her very chest. She opened the small leather book, no larger than the size of her hands. Again, she was confronted with those horrible spells. One that could kill, control, maim and obliterate.

All this time, she thought, anger boiling in her chest, her throat closing up with horror—all this time, and he had no intention of letting the king keep the throne. She came across several spells that had been bookmarked, underlined, circled—all with the same motive.

Control. Control. Control.

Aleksander's plan had been to possess the king and rule him like a puppet.

Alina hadn't felt this stupid in a long, long time.

From the corner of her eye she saw him: a tall, lean figure walking toward her, silhouetted like a black shadow against the morning sky.

But all Alina really saw was red. Alina clapped her hands together and stomped her foot on the ground, gaining balance as she aimed her Cut right at him. It was sloppy and hardly compact enough to do damage, but Aleksander leapt to the side at the show of threat, halfway to the ground before Alina shot up her hands again, circling them wide and blasting her light straight at his chest.

Aleksander rolled over quickly, missing no step from her attack, and flicked his fingers to create shadows enough to encircle his body and shield him from her light. His face was half-covered, just enough to see her by. His eyes were wide but his chin was dipped down defensively, scanning Alina's face for a possible answer to her sudden outburst.

Alina didn't give two shits. Her muscles tightened and stretched while she continually threw out her lights in small, effective bursts. Aleksander challenged every one, walking around her and keeping far enough away to see her movements easily.

Alina screamed at him.

“*This* was your plan then?” She cast the book away with a ray of light; sweat pooled in her lower back from all the light she was using and she hoped it was hot enough to sear several pages away. “Use merzost on the king? Make him your puppet, or—” Alina’s eyes flashed, “or were you planning on using it against me? Did you want me to do everything you asked for? Without troubling you by asking any damn questions?”

If Alina hadn’t been angry before, she raged now. Her arms knew no limits, she pressed out her light and attempted to squash him with it against a building. But she’d taught Aleksander to protect himself and he was a fast learner. He sliced through one of her light beams and used his shadows to create a space for himself, slowly inching closer and closer to her.

“How could you possibly think, that after everything that’s happened, the king would let me live?” he asked quietly, his voice so much lower yet just as intense as hers. “Let *us* live?”

He spun his hand around and his shadows followed—Alina’s knees crumpled below her and she twisted around, refusing to let his shadows get ahold of her, *never again*.

“Everything I've done has been to protect the Grisha, everything. Why can’t you see that?” he asked her, and if Alina heard a begging in his voice she was too far gone to care. She’d gambled weeks on this man, *miles* and *sunrises* and *time* and—everything! she’d gambled everything to see that he had changed, but he never had.

He was the same deceitful, spiteful parasite she’d always known in her heart he’d been, and she was a fool to think otherwise.

“Everything you’ve done has been a lie. You’re mad!” She wiped away the wetness from her face; she ignored the breaking of her heart in her chest as it rapidly expanded and crumpled like a kite in harsh winds. “You’re heartless. How often did you use my fear to your advantage? You’re just *so* good at mimicking human emotions. Did you *ever* trust me? Have you ever seen me as—even now, before all this—Saints, Aleksander! How broken are you?”

Alina yelled and threw out another beam of light, but Aleksander could see her emotions and her moves easily. She was so angry, every move was broadcasted, just like those beams of light.

“You? Call me ‘broken’? Starkov, look at you. Stubborn, selfish, terrified of your own potential,” he threw a shadow in her direction and flicked her hair completely loose from its untied knot. “You are one of the most powerful summoners in the world and I haven't even heard your name. What have you done to help us? You, who will live for an eternity, why are you content to just walk this road and leave at the end? Do Grisha mean nothing to you? What happened to you to make you walk away from—”

“*Perfect. Strangers*,” she answered, pausing to catch her breath. He was in front of her but he was still resting defensively, he’d never made a move yet to hurt her. “The Grisha may be ‘your people’ but they aren’t mine. What have they done for me? I have no people. It’s me, alone, that’s all. The only sun summoner in the whole world as you said—alone. Even you can’t understand that.”

“Can’t I?” he asked quietly, hands loose, but ready, at his sides.

“No!” she shouted. She lifted her hands, but not with light, with a plea. “You can’t! You had a family, even if it was your horrible mother—you are the same, you have someone to learn from. I had no one! I had nothing! And now I still have nothing, because you can’t even find it within yourself to consider another person you might care for. Say what you want about me being broken, but I would never betray my friends, I would never take anything from them. You, you will take everything, just so you can win.

“You’re a monster. And—” Alina swallowed the tears from her eyes, and she steadied her hands. She raised one in front of her. “You leave me with no choice.”

With the other, Alina began to reach for her coat pocket, for the last line of defense she’d taken so many weeks ago, but Aleksander grabbed her first, quickly pinning her arms to her side. Alina struggled against him, managing a knee to the side of his hip, but he threw her against the wall. Her head slammed into the rough stone and she was momentarily dazed while he quietly, yet furiously, demanded answers from her.

“I’ve asked this before and you never answered: *who are you*?”

Alina rolled her head over and looked at him at an angle. He was a head taller than her and she was never more angry that she hadn’t paid more attention during self-defense training. Botkin would be furious to see her like this.

“You’ve hidden the truth from me, you think I haven’t realized this? I’ve been looking beyond that for weeks, *Starkov*, because I still know our meeting was no accident. But I’m not fully convinced on why.

“Whoever you are, *what*ever you are,” he inhaled a breath and his eyes fluttered up to the sky. His face pinched into something painful—he was clearly angry, but when he looked back into her eyes, she saw the emotion there, too.

And once again, that tiny glimmer of hope she’d grown almost fond of.

“You cannot deny we are meant to be together. For whatever happens, you and I are bound. You must realize this. Starkov—”

He pressed her back into the wall, leaning his weight against her, effectively blocking her in permanently until he decided to let her go. “Tell me what you know—”

Alina pushed forward against him, pressing her mouth against his and shocking him into silence. She captured his lips with her own, tilting her face to deepen the kiss; she wanted him to stop asking questions, to stop doubting what she’d already told him. She wanted to go back to an hour ago when he hadn’t broken her heart and her expectations of what he could have been, what they could have been, *together*.

Aleksander nearly dropped an inch, the release of his tension was so tangible. He melted into her arms, though he didn’t loosen his grip on her a bit. The only movement he allowed was to let her rest her hands against his chest and to clutch at his heart.

Their kiss was no shy thing, borne of subtle glances and coy flirtation. It was fiery, heated, an expectation and a promise from the first moment their hands had touched weeks ago. Alina opened her mouth and he tasted her ravenously, sighing like a starving man taking a bite of oven-warm bread. They shared their breath, their lips, their tongues, and Alina could even feel his heart beating alongside her own.

For a moment he pulled away, just enough to look into her eyes. His newly bruised lips stretched into a thin, knowing line, and his brows compressed in tension. "Starkov, are you —" he swallowed, and Alina saw his jaw tighten, felt his deep inhale against her own chest. "Is this what you want?"

Alina leaned forward. She nodded, staring at those lips. "Yes. And you?"

"*Yes.*" Aleksander rushed toward her again, sealing their lips into another perfect, demanding kiss.

At last he released her arms and Alina wrapped them around his neck, pulling him closer, *closer*; Aleksander held her so tightly his fingernails created crescents through the fabric on her lower back.

"Aleksander," she whispered while he kissed a line down her jaw. She could feel his muscles begin to tense in anticipation. She dragged her nails down his shoulder and tilted her own neck, silently begging him to continue. When his mouth met hers again, Alina bit the bottom lip offered to her.

The bell tolled again, and the two jumped slightly at the sound. Their noses still touched, Alina could even feel his lashes flickering against her cheek like a candle flame. She leaned her head back again, and kissed him so softly he seemed to stop breathing.

That's when she lifted the letter opener above his head and stabbed him in the back.

The Heart Is An Arrow

Alina’s hands clenched so tightly she could feel her nails biting into her hands, drawing blood that dripped into her palms. A ringing sounded in her ears—could it be, could this man be—

He shook his head, as if knowing what she was thinking. “There is none other in this world who can summon the sun, child,” he told her with endless patience. Alina wanted to cry. She had been ready to believe she wasn’t alone, if only for a moment. Her heart sank and she exhaled a shaky breath. Never again then. Never again would she make that mistake.

“Besides, another sun summoner would not absolve you of your responsibility to the world.”

Alina’s head shot up. “What would you know about it?”

“I know what it is to read the branches of these trees,” he said gesturing to the lots on the table, “I know what it is to read the stars in the sky. I know your future, Sol Koroleva, and countless others, do you think I do not feel this burden?”

Flames of shame, frustration, despair, all heated Alina’s neck and face. She pressed her hands against her cheeks, trying to shove away the feelings.

The seer reached over and grabbed her hands.

A soft beam of light enveloped the room. It was a white light, so rare for Alina to conjure. It sparkled like moonlight in the tent, and all feelings of hopelessness were momentarily gone. Her heart felt full, and it was her light, it was always her light, who gave her the gift of peace.

“There will be a time,” the seer said, voice soft, with an underlying hardness to it Alina couldn’t quite place. “Where gifts can feel like a curse. You have sat in the light and blamed the darkness for its evil, but—” Alina looked into the eyes of the seer. All she could see of him were large black eyes, reflecting the light she was creating, “Sol Koroleva, the darkness is not evil.

“Someday, you will need it.”

Alina lifted her chin defiantly, angry at what she was hearing. “He is a monster, not a human,” she said. “And why are you telling me this? What possible use can this have? I need to enter the Fold, destroy it by going back—how will knowing there is at least one other human amplifier help me in this? Are you going back with me?”

The seer across from her smiled. She was sick of it. Patronizing, horrible man. “Because you will succeed, Sol Koroleva. You will destroy the Fold. But another will take its place. You must find a way to correct your mistakes. Going back and fixing others—this is not your purpose.”

“Then what is my purpose? Why do you have to speak in riddles?”

“Your purpose is behind you. Find it. Accept it. Search for the solution. It will be within the palm of your hand.”

Alina opened her mouth. She closed it. She opened it again, leveling him with a stare that could Cut a mountain in half. “That,” she said, “is the most *useless* advice I’ve ever received.”

“It will serve you well when you need it,” he said, smiling that awful, patient smile. “Remember, Sol Koroleva, *the heart is an arrow; it demands aim to land true.*”

* * *

Everything happened at once.

She knew just as she struck him that there wasn’t enough force to pierce his heart. He gasped from the pain and shock, looking into her eyes with unshielded anger and—what else was there—?

Soldiers’ feet echoed on the stone streets, coming straight for them. Of course, how could they not have heard with the two of them raging that morning? To have made it all the way through the forest to be taken by the king’s men here—Alina wanted to laugh. How her temper always got the better of her.

Arms grabbed Alina and the letter opener fell from her hands—the clanging reverberated, and if their fight or the soldiers’ shouts hadn’t awakened anyone, surely that sound would wake the dead.

The last thing she saw before they wretched her arms behind her, before she could scream and a bag was pulled over her head, were Aleksander’s pained, pleading eyes. He shouted at the men to let her go, that she was nothing to them—

She felt a sharp pain on the back of her skull; darkness filled her vision, and her last thought was how she had failed, again.

* * *

When next she woke her knees hit a marble floor. Her legs trembled from the shock and pain, and the dark bag that obscured her vision was lifted from her head. Alina moaned on the ground. The pain was all over—the back of her head, her eyes from the sudden brightness, her legs from hitting the hard floor. She wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d beat her while she was unconscious, too, her body felt sore all over.

She inhaled deeply, trying to recenter herself, and looked around her.

She recognized this place.

The Lantsov crest lay below her feet: the Ravkan Double Eagle, with one talon holding a scepter, the other clenching three arrows of black, red and blue. Gold encrusted molding surrounded the walls, encompassing the room with an air and ego that shouted lavishness and glorified wealth. Alina thought about how her soldier's coat was hardly thick enough to keep out the Ravkan winter cold as she stared at the room around her, thinking back to the first time she'd entered this room….

Beside her was Aleksander bleeding from his back. The cut on his forehead from just days ago had reopened, and a thin line of blood flowed over his cheekbone, his jawline. He gazed straight ahead, hardly knowing she was there, in direct sight of the king.

The King.

Alina watched the king, the one who'd attempted to kill Aleksander all those years ago in the history books, as he sat on his too-large, gold encrusted throne.

He was thinner and appeared wilier than the histories credited him. While he had the height, he had none of the bulk of the warrior king who was professed to have taken down the Darkling. Though she knew from personal experience just how much of a lie it was, she couldn't quite see the king she'd known from her own time to this one here.

This one looked far too interested in the two before him, far too keen. His mouth twitched into a simpering grin, and his long, almost handsome, nose pointed downward, as if moving away to give the king an even better vision of the two of them.

"My Shadow Summoner, kind of you to finally return the call," smiled the king from his perch on the throne. He rested one ankle over his other knee and cracked the knuckles from his right hand one by one with the thumb of the same hand. Each crack resounded throughout the throne room. "And you've brought a gift. Is this your healer? Or is it…"

Alina tried to look away but a long sword from a nearby soldier forced her gaze back up. She eyed the sword, and felt the tip of it strike open a tiny bit of skin from her jaw. She winced, and saw the king lick his lips at the same time.

The king came down from the dais then, and walked straight toward her. He snapped his fingers and the sword against Alina's neck forced her face even higher—her neck strained from the effort, all so the king didn't have to bend to get a good look at her. All so Alina would be completely vulnerable to having her throat slit at the flick of a wrist.

"She's cute," the king said to no one. To Aleksander he said, "maybe I'll leave her jail cell open tonight, let everyone have a turn."

Alina could hear the terrible silence that followed. There was an ugly beast in the room, she could feel it, and it was springing into an attack.

Question was, which one of them was it.

"What is it," the king asked, using a hand to gesture at her face, her body, "really? I've heard from my soldiers the funniest rumor. Neighbors say shadows crossed the alleyways early this morning, along with—" he paused, his grin widened, "—bright flashing lights."

He laughed, and it was the sickest sound Alina had ever heard.

"Amazing! Light—could it be? A shadow summoner has met a light summoner. Let it be true." The king paused, he returned to sit in his throne, sitting all too straight and with too much attentiveness aimed at the two of them. He took a long, long sip of wine, his eyes never leaving them. "Don't worry, I killed all the civilians," he said the word with such distaste, as though it soured his wine, "so your secret is safe with me. Well, with us."

The king gestured for a servant to take the wine, and then stood to his full height.

He clopped down the steps in his shining shoes, the sabre attached to his hip swayed as he moved closer.

He came directly for Aleksander this time, and with an adder's speed, whipped out a hand and backslapped his cheek with such force Aleksander was nearly thrown to the ground. The king evaluated him like he might rusty silver.

"I liked you winning my wars for me," said the king, "but you're getting a little uppity."

"You liked drinking wine while people died in your name," Aleksander answered, so venomously Alina could hear his breath rattling in his lungs. "Now you want a new toy to destroy."

For a moment the two stared at one another and Alina could feel the tension thicken like an unwatched stew. How had the two worked together, before all this? Each seemed to be screaming their own agenda: the selfish king and his need to work the least to rule the most; the disgraced Grisha and his need to grasp freedom at any cost.

Alina saw them both as monsters from where she kneeled on the cold marble, but which one would get her out of this?

"Your majesty," Alina appealed, dipping her chin and attempting to look penitent, "I have a proposition."

The king slowly turned his head toward her. The flat expression in his eyes, the deep, flat line of his mouth both told her to watch her step, step cautiously. She was going into deep, unfamiliar waters.

"I—" she saw Aleksander shaking his head, compelling her to stop, *stop now*, "I am exactly as they say, I am a Sun Summoner. Let me command your Second Army. I can lead the Grisha. I have no ambition other than to—" *Lie, lie,* Alina commanded herself, she just needed to get out of that room, somewhere safe.

He was walking toward her now with that dead look in his eye, and Alina couldn't help the feeling of foreboding when Aleksander turned his head away. The tight clench of his jaw said more to her than any word of warning could.

“I have no ambition other than to watch over them,” she finished, bowing her head while the king stood directly over her. All she could see were the shining tips of his shoes. All she could feel was the invisible darkness folding around her.

“No ambition,” the king repeated.

A crack sounded and Alina had no idea where it came from, at first. But then she blinked and realized she was completely on the ground. Her arms were twisted still behind her, and the dull pain in her head began to throb. Her stomach then exploded in pain and she cried out—

The king kicked her again, stomping on her shoulder, stabbing her with those shiny black tips into her chest. Alina couldn’t breathe, she was in such pain, only pain, bright spots littered her vision and *she couldn’t breathe*—

“How many times do you think he told me that?!” the king shouted, continuing to batter her with his feet. His arms flailed to the side and Alina could feel blood dripping from her temple onto the cool floor—it was the only respite from the pain she felt, that cool, calming sensation of water on her forehead, like she was being anointed by a priest. Alina saw through blurry vision across the throne room. Aleksander, still on his knees, reaching out his hands outward toward her.

Alina promised herself she would regret nothing, but that sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, nothing to do with the way the king continued to bludgeon her to death with his boot, sank its teeth into her belly.

If he had told her the truth...would she have believed him?

She began to close her eyes, not hearing the slip and slide of the king as he continued to beat her while her blood further stained the ground beneath them, encompassing her form like a red halo.

She could see Baghra, face determined, set in stone, before her now. The light from the torch illuminated the underground caverns just below them years from now—if Aleksander had been the one to tell her, would she have thought differently about their mission?

Or was life a series of learning stories from the wrong people?

Who told the histories? Alina thought to herself, in the middle of her own death. *Who told the stories of their lives, of their people?*

It was people like the king, she knew. Like the rulers who had forgotten the people on the side of the road—the healer Luda, the farmhouse family. Who remembered the faces of the poor and dusty?

Did she?

Blackness mercifully came in from the sides of the room, comforting her like the shadows of sleep. Her vision turned dark, and it was with the crisp irony of the universe that she would never be able to recall her final words.

“I’ll remember them,” she murmured before she entered a deep, deep sleep.

But words were cheap, and she would never need to remember them to live by them.

Alina awoke to a searing pain in her chest—a Grisha healer was stitching her ribs back together with agonizing slowness.

Alina, hardly capable of intelligent thought, couldn’t remember where she was. A Grisha was helping her, did that mean—

The moment her ribs were attached enough to allow Alina room to breathe, she heard the telltale sound of chains rattling around the hands of the one who had just healed her. She heard the shouts and grumbles of soldiers, she could hear the healer being shoved out of her room, and Alina remembered the boot that had brought her here.

She turned her face into the cold stone, breathing in steadily, breathing out shakily.

Nothing had gone to plan, not since she’d taken that slip of merzost and hidden it in her coat pocket. Alina almost wanted to cry, but she had no tears left to spend. It was all her fault, completely and irrevocably her fault.

She should have—no, there was no “should” anymore, was there? If she’d stopped the Fold from forming, then killed Aleksander, what then? This horrible king would continue to defile, strike down, and imprison the Grisha. How could she ignore that fact now, when her head still felt like a hollowed out egg, cracked on a hard counter?

Why was every decision she ever made the worst one? Why was Alina destined for failure?

Alina pushed away the sound of the seer’s voice, it felt like decades ago, and reached her hand to cover her stomach. Her ribs were barely healed, and her collarbone stung when she struggled to lift herself up. She cried out from the pain, but she sat up anyway and crawled over to lean against a cold, stone wall. It scratched and tore at the skin against her cheek, but Alina needed something to rest her head upon, if only for a moment.

“I don’t love saying ‘I told you so,’” said a voice to her right, and Alina almost laughed with relief. “But I do remember saying something about the king not letting us live.”

“And your plan would have gone peachy, hmm?” Alina responded, turning her head closer to the voice.

From the corner of her room was a hole small enough to let the rats in. Alina saw Aleksander’s hand slide through, and Alina reached forward, instinctively, pleadingly, and grabbed hold of the fingers tightly.

“I’m sorry, Starkov,” he said quietly, so quiet she could have mistaken it for the wind that howled outside their cells.

The tears that had refused to fall before now came openly. “How can you say that?” Alina asked him. “I’ve betrayed you, twice. I’ve stabbed you, I would have left you in the king’s mercy. How can you possibly say that?”

“I didn’t trust you enough to prepare you. Maybe I was right…” his voice trailed away, and moments of silence comforted them both. Their sticky, dirty, blood-encrusted fingers held on tightly, tethered like a rope in a storm. “Maybe I was wrong.”

Alina sniffled and she wiped her nose crassly against her shoulder. Her hands were bound, just as his were, but she needed that comfort.

“I’ve been wrong, too,” she said. “For so long, I believed you were—” she swallowed paused, still not knowing what to say. “I thought you were something, someone, that I imagined. I never thought you might be different from that image. I never gave you that benefit of the power to be able to change.”

“I don’t care anymore, Starkov,” he said. “Who you are doesn’t matter anymore. I don’t need to know.”

Alina laughed. Despite what she knew was true about him, that he wasn’t the evil monster she’d always wanted him to be, he did always have that knack for manipulation.

“Liar,” she said, the smile obvious in her voice. He squeezed her fingers. “Aleksander,” she said, suddenly serious again. A thumb padded against the back of her hand in response. “You’ve told me who you are. And you’re right, I haven’t been honest with you.

“Can I…I want to give you my name. My real name. Please—” she said, suddenly desperate to let go of the truth. “I need someone to know who I am, maybe someday they’ll know I tried…”

Alina closed her eyes and she could feel her heart pounding hard in her chest. Everything was going to be laid on the line in this moment, the moment she revealed herself to her worst enemy, her strongest partner against the world.

She’d made every wrong decision up until this moment. What else could she possibly have to lose?

“Tell me,” he whispered.

“My name,” she said, and warmth spread over her lips as her name crossed the threshold, rushing toward Aleksander with open arms, “is Alina.

“Alina Starkov. I’m just an orphan from Keramzin, not Shu, not Ravkan, and—”

She swallowed, uncertain if she’d ever said any of this out loud. She’d known all of it in her heart, but she’d never voiced who she was out loud. Had she?

“I can summon light, and it brings me more joy than anything I’ve ever felt. It’s the only part of myself I truly love.”

Aleksander gripped her hand completely through the small hold in their cells, but Alina hardly felt it. Her heart felt light, her head felt gloriously empty, devoid of anger, shame, and hatred.

She was a Sun Summoner, she was called Sol Koroleva, and she loved it.

“Alina,” he said, and Alina gasped; she gripped his hand so hard she was convinced it was just another part of her, another limb they both shared. “Don’t give up hope. We’ll get out, I promise you.”

“So many promises, Aleksander,” she said.

“So little faith, Alina.”

Alina smiled through her tears, her pain forgotten, her failures forgiven. They stayed like that through the night, waiting for the inevitable orders of their deaths that would come in the morning.

But for now they had this: the strength of their forged bond, the understanding and empathy only the other could have. They contained within them such an unyielding power, coursing through their veins; loving it, hating it, unable to live without it.

Alina and Aleksander held the only part of themselves they could give, and even through their rocky sleep, neither of them let go.

All the while, a small piece of paper lay half-remembered in the lining of Alina’s coat pocket, whispering sweet nothings into her heart through the long, devastating night before their executions.

It Demands Aim To Land True

“Don’t ever say I never did anything for you.” Alina looked up from her book, eyes now darkened with the fearful prospect of entering the Fold in just a few days’ time. Zoya stood there, hand on one hip, her other hand opening the tent flap.

Alina was about to protest at letting the wind in, and further when *had* Zoya ever done anything for her, when a tall figure fucked under the fabric and into her tent.

Alina’s jaw dropped open, and before Zoya could roll her eyes, Alina jumped up and into Mal’s arms.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Alina said, eyes watering and throat closing.

“I could say the same about you,” he responded. Unseen by Alina was a small nod, a mouthed “thank you,” before Zoya exited the tent and left them to it.

Alina pulled back from their embrace and looked up at Mal. She’d always hated how much taller than her he was, and he seemed to recall that very fact as he smiled down at her with just a bit of an impish grin.

“Why are you here?” Alina asked, using the back of her hand to wipe her face. “I thought…I thought—”

“Look,” he said, not quite letting go of her, but releasing her all the same. He ran a hand over his head, staring at nothing while he tried to explain. “Alina, I—”

“It’s okay,” Alina smiled, going back into his arms, trying to placate him, “it doesn’t matter—”

“It does, Alina,” he said, and fully removed himself from her. He circled the tent and faced away from her. Alina could hear the wind outside the tent, she could hear the grumbling and grunts of her team outside. The storms of late summer were blooming overhead, but Alina spared no thought for them except the one that was in her room right then.

“It’s no secret that,” he began slowly, “your power. It scares me.” Mal sighed while Alina’s heart broke, just a little. The shame she felt came in slowly, but before it could poison her heart against herself, Mal continued, “But that’s just a reaction to something I don’t understand.

“I’ll always understand *you*, Alina, I’ll always think of you as family. And family, real family, we don’t leave each other. I’ll always be here, on this side, waiting for you. I need you to know that. I love you, Alina. Saints, I’ve loved you since we were kids—you get that, don’t you?”

Mal looked at her with those soft brown eyes that had always managed to melt her heart. His hands, the ones that had once cradled motherless rabbits, the ones that had hit commanding officers to protect her, now crumpled his military issued hat.

Alina stepped forward, and covered his hands with her own. “I love you, too, Mal.” She looked at him then, really looked. Those eyes she could never say no to—she knew what they were to each other. “You know, I always thought we were ships passing each other in the night, but this is who we are to each other aren’t we?

“Running out on each other, always returning. You said it, didn’t you? We’re family, Mal—” her voice broke, but not from pain. Their love was everlasting, it went beyond gravestones, beyond words. It was the only love she knew was real—she’d kill for Mal, he’d kill for her; but they’d also always be honest, brutally honest, hatefully honest.

Ride or die, that was their kind of love.

“You’ll give him hell, won’t you?”

Alina smiled, eyes squinting up at him with an open heart, and pure mischief. “I’d give him nothing else.”

Their execution was scheduled just after daybreak.

It gave Alina and Aleksander the night to share between them, their histories, too. Alina told Aleksander everything she’d been holding back from him: the Fold, the war against Grisha, their past, all of it. He sat on the other side of the wall, and Alina’s words poured from her in a rush of anxiety and fear—he was quiet on the other side, so quiet. She told him of the plan they’d hatched to send her back here, to erase the Fold from existence, to…

To kill him, and be done with it.

Aleksander didn’t interrupt her, not even once.

Alina’s mouth dried, her words finally vanishing from her lips. The stone held vigil between them, and Alina squeezed Aleksander’s fingers through the give in its underside, begging it silently not to crumble. She didn’t think she could bear to see the look on his face. She felt so stupid now, thinking she could accomplish any of this. Why had she thought she was strong enough to stop the Fold, to save the world from that corruption? She had, technically, but then, what would the world become now, without Aleksander, without her?

The moment it dawned on her that she would never see her friends again, Alina’s heart clove in two. She’d lost the letter opener; all that remained of her friends was the timepiece Nikolai had given to her, still tucked into her pocket. She couldn’t hear it; she’d forgotten to wind it at all since coming here. But the warm gold metal sang in her pocket, and at least, she thought, she’d carry that memory in her final moments.

What would she think about, when they slipped the knot over her head? She wondered.

Finally, Alina heard Aleksander exhale. “If the plan was to kill me all along,” he asked, voice quieter than the skittering of the rats on the other side of the cell. Alina strained her ears to hear him. “Why did you wait?”

“I had intended to let the soldiers kill you,” she answered. “But I…couldn’t. Not with the Grisha about to be killed. I had no choice then. And then,” she swallowed. She was horribly thirsty, but no prisoner before their death would be given anything of necessity. What would be the point, after all?

“Then I was weak. And then, I wanted to see if you would prove me wrong.”

“And I didn’t.”

“No,” she said, recalling her anger with him. Their hands tightened. “You didn’t.”

“Will it be worth it then,” he asked, “to see me hanged tomorrow?”

Alina opened her mouth to speak, but she had no words.

“Your mission will have gone to plan, entirely. No Fold. No one to use merzost. No possible way it could happen again. You will have succeeded, Alina.”

Alina’s mouth tasted suddenly of bitter ash. The small coiling feeling in her stomach started up again—that anger she felt for the first time, days ago, when she saw the wreckage of the farmhouse. She imagined for a moment what that farmhouse once contained—a joyful family, a cursed family? Did they love each other, did they hate each other? Were there endless days of laughter and love, were there endless nights of fear and terror? She would never know what it held, only that it didn’t exist anymore.

And that knowledge made her want to rage against the world.

What had that violence wrought, the destruction of that farmhouse? Two Grisha had killed an entire family, their own mission succeeded. For what? Pennies. Lives for pennies, that’s all this life offered.

But what could she possibly do? A voice slithered into her mind, and Alina tried to shake it out. It clamped its teeth around her heart. *Is there nothing she could do now?*

Silly girl, she heard echoing in her mind. *Playing with magic that doesn’t belong to you.*

What if it did belong to her?

You’re making a mistake, another whisper sounded, sounding so much like the voice she once would have followed anywhere.

Aching jaws clamped hold of that voice, and silenced it.

At first light, Alina and Aleksander were torn from their sleepy, hand-held embrace, and shoved through the halls toward the back gate. Her heart pounded and her hands sought for Aleksander. Their eyes met only once before they were thrown into the open-ended carriage; both of them had their heads covered with thick canvas bags, preventing the crowds from seeing their faces, and them from seeing the crowds while rotting fruit and stones were hurled at them from the sidelines. The one thing that bound them all together the look of sincerity and humanity in their eyes, would be hidden from the world.

Instead they were just a pair of puppet bodies to be torn and trampled on.

Alina clung to the side of the carriage; the roads were so damaged each jolt nearly flung her into the muddy street. Her knuckles were numb by the time she'd arrived at the city square, and her clothes were horrifyingly wet with sodden foods from Saints-knew where.

Every time she called for Aleksander, it earned her a whack on the back, the shoulders, the legs. The pain stung, but she hardly felt it—it was the roar of the crowd that had her dizzy and dazed, and she was desperately seeking out for a single call from that cacophonous hoard. Aleksander answered her every time, earning his own beatings for responding. She heard a particularly cruel crack, and her name was halted in the middle of his mouth.

The drumbeats sounded, and the crowd began to cheer.

Alina's shins smacked against the wooden steps to her podium. It wasn't until she was wrestled to the top, the bag was finally removed from her head. She saw the crowd erupt into horrible boos and disparaging shouts. Her mother was a whore, her father was a demon—unimaginative insults. Alina wanted to scoff and sneer at them all. Honestly, the orphans in Keramzin had done better to crush her spirit. But she kept her face perfectly neutral—she wouldn't give them another reason to feel sanctimonious for hating her.

The crowd went on endlessly, but there were pockets Alina could see in between the shouting and angry mobs. There were some who held their hands over their hearts, who crossed themselves with the blessings of the Saints on their lips.

Alina looked at all of them, knowing exactly who they were.

And finally, just across from her, Aleksander stood as well. He looked as horrid as she felt: bags under his sleepless eyes, freshly cut hair strewn all over his sweaty, dirty face. He looked at her over the divide, and Alina had never seen him so helpless—yet. There was that look in his eye again, the one she'd now grown familiar seeing. How could he be hopeful in a moment like this? He tried to shout at her over the distance, but it was too loud.

Alina, she could make out from reading his lips, *go back.*

Alina couldn't quite believe what she was seeing from him.

Go home. Go home.

Alina shook her head. She wasn't leaving him here, not like this. She'd imagined his death before—hell, she'd tried to make it happen several times now. But Alina knew now his death would do nothing, and further, *she didn't want him to die*. He couldn't die, not after everything that had come to pass.

The drumbeats pressed on.

Alina was brought to stand on a stool, Aleksander's guards mimicked the motions and stood up as well. A thick, scratching rope was brought to her neck, and tightened so hard Alina coughed in response.

"Ravkans!" Alina turned her head at the sound of the familiar voice. The king stood on a separate platform, many yards away from where Alina and Aleksander would be hung. Close enough to see the whites of their eyes as they suffocated to death, far enough he wouldn't smell them wet and defecate their clothing as a result of the painful death.

"Look at these traitors!" he called, throwing his hands wide toward the crowd. "They came in last night, and tried to kill your king!"

Screams and shouts sounded from the crowd below, and Alina ground her teeth at the sight of the spectacle.

"Thieves in the night!" he shouted, eyes gleaming with something hateful in them. "Murderers! *Grisha!*" The yells turned to jeers as the crowd lamented the existence of their kind. Alina fought to shout back, but no one would hear her over this rabble.

She stared back at Aleksander, who fixed his eyes on her, and her alone.

Alina clenched her hands into fists.

"I say to you all, Grisha! Beware! Your hatefulness comes at a price! You think you can bring down Ravka? Well, what do its glorious *true* citizens have to say to that?"

More pelting of stones, one smacked against Alina's lip, causing blood to flow freely from her mouth. The crowd was livid now, Alina could feel the heat of their anger and fear more than any of the stones they threw her and Aleksander's way.

Alina should have felt powerless in that moment. She saw the end right before her, both hers and Aleksander's. She would never know her friends again, she would not return to them from this battlefield, victorious. She should have felt completely alone, and terrified.

But Alina did not feel those things.

Unable to move her arms, Alina looked up at the sky. The sun was covered over with thick, dark, mournful storm clouds. Soon the rain would come and wash them away. The dirty roads, cracked from lack of repair, the dirty Ravkans, their skin covered in dust and grime from hard labor, the dirty buildings, old and crippled and overused. Soon, Alina would bathe them in the light of her wrath.

She closed her eyes.

She whispered the spell she'd memorized by heart, silent words in her head, hardly daring to speak them out loud, knowing the destruction they would reap.

But the crowd was calling for her death, for Aleksander's death, and Alina would not let this happen. She opened her mouth, and she spoke the language of light, Old Magic, and total annihilation.

"~~The tiny things you see before you, they are specks of dust on your altar~~," Alina mumbled below her breath. The crowd was still shouting, still bellowing for their deaths.

"~~I give them to you, holy magic, and give thanks to you —let me build a kingdom in your honor, let me share our power~~."

The sky began to spread, light violently pulsed through the gaps in the clouds. The people's shouts for retribution, for death and penance became scattered. The Grisha had been the first to look up, to see the heavens opening above them—iron gates opened and the heavy weight of them began to pull the sky apart.

Alina never stopped her prayer. "~~Let me spread your work across the world, and let them see hell in your anger~~—"

A resounding boom, so loud it shook the ground, an earthquake formed below the king and shattered the wood under his feet—Alina didn't stop, not when the screams of hate turned to screams of terror, not when the lightning began raining down from the sky like hailstones of pure fire, dropping down on the *true citizens* of Ravka.

"~~Let the world be crushed by our glory~~—!" Alina screamed, her limbs were shaking but not from the splitting of the ground, from her own words, her own anger, and yes, her own glorious power, power she loved and craved and held dearer to her than anything, anything—

"~~Let them bow to me!~~

"~~Let them submit to me, your proxy~~—

"~~S u b m i t~~ —

"~~S u b m i t~~ —

The final words echoed through the sky above, where there were no more clouds, no shades of blacks and grays—only pure light covered them all, and the heat of it was outstanding. It was the molten sun that had come to visit them all, embrace them in a merciless, clenched fist.

"~~S u b m i t~~ —!" Alina cried, "~~t o~~ —" her arms broke free of her chains and she lifted them toward her light, to the endless seat of brightness that belonged to her, her alone, "~~m e~~ !"

The sky RUPTURED.

If the world had shuddered when she entered the Fold, now it snapped and broke and crumbled. Light came from the sky, heaving its rays like a sick animal, not even Alina could control it now. She looked up at her light, eyes blinded to anything else—she hardly noticed anyone coming for her, hardly noticed the sword that aimed for her heart.

A clang, a squelch, a thud.

Alina's eyes shot open and before her was Aleksander, arms thrown above him, hands splayed out in defense.

The body of the king fell just inches before her, whose sword had been raised to strike at Alina's heart, missed by a hair's breadth of time before Aleksander had used his Cut to bring him down.

The light still rained down over them all, but Aleksander held out his hand. "You manage to attract some trouble, you know," he said. "Alina, you need to go." She didn't hear him, not really, but she reached out her hand. They grasped each other over the divide, his shadows whirled around her hands and body, shielding them again from the bright unending light.

Alina could hear them now—the screams of terror, the total destruction her anger had wrought on Os Alta. People ran and ducked for cover, but the light was eating them up, grabbing them like greedy hands and enveloping them into the sky. Alina, horrified, saw that those who weren't burned instantly by the light, twisted and morphed into creatures of light, wings expanding, faces stretching wide to reveal sharp, terrorizing teeth. What the light did not take, the monsters did. The only ones who seemed to stand a chance were other Grisha, who used their powers as weapons to fight against the light. Alina watched as a squaller used her wind to shield an old man; she watched as a tidemaker broke a beam of light into pieces and escaped.

Yet Aleksander did not bat a single eye at the sight. He stared only at her. He brought her to her feet, and they ran.

Through the chaos, the monsters and light left them both untouched. Aleksander used his shadows to protect them, and though Alina could not control the light above her, it seemed to skirt around her, stepping through and over her like a familiar dance partner. She could hear its voice in the back of her mind, *did you really think you could destroy me?* It asked her, laughing. *Now I am part of you, now I am you.*

She shook her head, ignoring it.

When at last they found shelter, a small enclave of rocks that had once been a stone wall, Alina and Aleksander embraced each other with such strength, neither could breathe. "I think that was eight," Alina said, and she felt Aleksander's shoulder shake beneath her.

Far too quickly, Aleksander pulled Alina from him, beseeching her with his black eyes. "Alina, go back," he said. "If you stay here they will find you, kill you," he reached forward and took a lock of her hair. Alina was horrified to see it had turned a pale, bright white, so far from her dark locks before the merzost. "You're easy to spot now.

“Go,” he compelled her, and she nodded. Despite the use of merzost, something in her rallied and shook, and the energy it created spurred her on for one final spell, the spell that would send her forward in time.

But this time when incanting the spell, Alina kept her eyes wide open, staring back at Aleksander for every single moment. She wouldn’t miss it, not a single second, of his beautiful face, looking at her with all the hope and love in his heart.

Oh Saints, she realized in that moment. It was love.

It was love he had been looking at her with. The knowledge they were the only two, that she was his and he was hers—it had been love that had bound them together. Alina had always assumed it was a connection of abilities, of a single empathy that the other knew what one felt. But it was more than that—it was the unexplainable. It was a kiss in moonlight, it was a giddy laugh at seeing someone’s smile, it was the look of a person that made you instantly think, “You. It’s you. There you are.”

He loved her, he always had.

And she loved him.

“**[illegible]**,” Alina whispered, a smile tugging at her lips.

She loved him.

“**—his conduit**,” she said, ” **his guide**.

“**He [illegible] crucible—[illegible] him [illegible] bring him to safety [illegible] him [illegible] place where I will meet him again.**”

Alina clasped her hands and the smallest, softest of lights was cradled in her palm. Aleksander looked at her light, eyes wet, but filled with a determination to see her off safely. Alina pushed forward her hands, and she pressed her light into Aleksander’s heart.

For the second time that morning, the world shook around them.

It wasn’t as it was before the Fold, when Alina was terrified and uncertain. Aleksander’s head jerked up, looking at her with confusion while his body flickered in and out of time.

“Alina—” he called, and she smiled at him, reaching out her hand to touch his cheek one final time.

“I’ll meet you there, in four hundred years,” she said. “Wait for me, I’ll come for you.”

“Alina, no!” he cried, but when he clenched his chest, when he tried to reach out to her and went right through her, it was all too late.

Tears fell down Alina’s face, but there was only a sadness that was bittersweet.

She would see him in four hundred years.

Aleksander called for her one last time, heart broken through time, and vanished from sight.

Alina was alone, but the world had not forgotten her.

A Safe Haven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Just what are you up to.”

Alina didn’t turn around; she stood perfectly still and straight. Her head dipped back and she looked up at the tent, as if the Saints would enlighten her as to why now, why here, did he decide to show his face.

“Alina,” the Darkling said, and Alina finally turned around, saw the whole of him.

He looked miserable, yet still stunning. His eyes were nearly black from lack of rest, and there were deep bags underneath them. Perhaps it was from the merzost that was constantly draining his soul. His cheeks were hollowed out, appearing like rocks on a wasting beach, those rocks that manage to stand the test of time despite the waves beating and crashing against them in heavy, torrential storms.

His hands, they were stretched thin; he was stretched thin. He looked like someone took a line through him and pulled, and now there he stood, hiding in his black cloak like a child, his shadows caressing his chin and shoulders like a living cat.

“You are up to something,” he said.

She came closer to him.

She picked up one of his hands, linking her fingers through his.

“What if I am,” she responded. She brought his hand toward her, pulling her to him.

She could distract him for tonight, she thought. She only had until the morning, and then she’ll enter the Fold.

She’ll go back, and she’ll kill the being in front of her.

(She wondered if she wasn’t being merciful in doing so.)

His eyes, though hollow, saw right through her.

“My Alina,” he whispered, trying to sound threatening, sarcastic, but he only sounded lonely. “Tell me you aren’t doing something foolish.”

“Everthing I do to you is foolish,” she countered and he clicked his tongue, slowly shaking his head.

“Not foolish,” he said. “Stubborn. Relentless.”

Alina looked down at their hands, and she could feel how hard he gripped her. She felt the bones through his thin skin. How long will he last like this, with the nichevo'ya seeping his energy from his body?

How long until everything gets pulled down to the ground?

"You've accused me of not caring about the Grisha," she said, boring her dark eyes into his. "But you're wrong. You have been for a long time. Tell me—" she said, and she brought some bite to her tone. "When did you forget this was all for them?"

The Darkling curled his lip at her, puffing out his weakening chest. "Without me, they are lost. Who else will defend them?" he sneered. "You? Alone?"

"Perhaps."

He was still looking down his nose on her, no more moved by her than a statue. Perhaps at one point, he was doing it all for the Grisha. But the chaos, the destruction, the careless expense of life and gleeful partaking of cruelty—these were not the makings of a redeemed man. She wondered if she'll find him changed before the Fold. She wonders if she'll be looking at the same person.

Maybe for the first time in a year, she felt a sudden compassion for him.

She had Mal to help guide her—she had her friends. They were the family who had shown her her mistakes, and had helped her correct them, one by one.

But who did he have?

Baghra? The corporalki? His oprichniki? What did it feel like to be loved and feared at once?

"Have you ever known what it was like to be a safe haven for someone?" she asked him. "Have you ever felt that way?"

The Darkling said nothing for a long time. Alina turned around; she began to undress before him, as though he was no longer there. She couldn't hear him move, she couldn't even hear him breathe. Soon, she was changed into her nightclothes and she dropped into her cot, closing her eyes to try to catch a moment of sleep.

Just as she began to fall asleep, when her breath deepened and her guard falls, she heard soft movement, the fluttering of a cape behind her. The bed dipped. It was only a little thing, it could hardly fit the two of them, yet somehow it managed to cradle them both.

"You are that for me," he said.

She couldn't help but wrap her arm behind her, around his thinning neck. He breathed into the side of her neck, her face, and she could feel the wet tears touch her hair.

What could she do, that night, but mourn the impending loss of him.

Who else would?

The fire cast flickering light and shadows over the face of the young woman across from him, the one who was lying through her teeth.

Saints, was she a terrible liar. She paused every time before she answered, and she always sounded as certain as a sunflower in clouded weather.

He watched her every move: every twitch, every stammering hesitation. Her throat compressed when she swallowed hard, "You can call me 'Starkov,'" she said, and he almost couldn't help the smile from coming to his lips.

Starkov, her surname. A fake name? It didn't matter. How predictable she was already to him, telling him only what she *thought* he needed to know.

He could beat her at this game. "I'm Aleksander," he said, and her eyes widen in surprise. did she know his name already? Is she aware of the power it holds? Or is it something else entirely?

Give her what she wants, a voice in Aleksander's mind tells him, *give her what she expects*. That is nearly his entire life: telling people what they want to hear, or what they specifically don't, all so they could feel safe in the knowledge of "knowing" him.

All until he has no need for them anymore and discards them.

Only one thing mattered to him: that he was destined to free the Grisha. From the day they tried to take his bones, he knew he didn't want to keep living his life this way—distrusting of non-Grisha, distrusting of Grisha. It was no way to live, and though his mother was content to run, he never will be.

He will free the Grisha if he had to kill the world to accomplish it.

They said little else of importance that night, that Aleksander could recall. He had Starkov in the palm of his hand. By the time they roll around to Os Alta, he was certain she'd be in lock-step with him.

When she continued to lie, to lie about Luda, he was finally outraged.

"I have survived centuries," he spat. "I will survive more."

She laughed; he didn't expect that.

Why did she feel so familiar to him?

Aleksander almost considered letting the bear get her.

In the end, a Sun Summoner will give him more things than she could possibly take away from him.

That evening, while she bathed and Aleksander flipped through the book of merzost, the one he'd had just enough time after the battle in the field to take, his plans began to solidify.

The paper was worn and fell easily to his touch, moving at every push and pull of his fingertips. He took a pencil and wrote notes in the margins—they were his, these books, the only remnant of any bequeathment of his terrible ancestor—picking out the best spells to use on the king.

Starkov hardly noticed him, content to wallow in her own mind.

Let her, he thought to himself, and turned another page.

The more words that came out of her mouth, the more Aleksander couldn't believe what he was hearing. Had this woman even lived the life of a Grisha? Who had ever heard of such sanctimonious pandering toward world peace? Despite her powers, he began to notice she used them only as a separate entity, not as part of herself.

He thought back to the king and his cruelty—what Aleksander had endured so that Grisha like her could walk around in relative safety—until now—and how his efforts would never be enough for people like her.

If only she knew the feel of a boot pressing down on her neck, Aleksander thought angrily, then maybe she'd understand.

But then she touched him and his powers ignite—he could feel the pull of her own light calling to him, and it made his heart ache.

Through that touch, it felt like she knew him; he certainly knew her. His feelings of anger turned to longing—

He didn't need her help, but he wanted *it, and that was indistinguishable to him.*

* * *

Starkov thought that by separating Grisha and non-Grisha, the threat of them might actually be a bigger wall to climb. The antagonizing part of his mind, the one that would have lashed out at her before, now sat quietly.

He didn't agree with her, but the idea contrasted so starkly with his own, it began to fray the edges of his own arguments. He pinned it in the back of his mind, like covering over a mirror during a grieving period.

He sought out her touch, and he hated himself for it. Any moment he could reach for her hand, pulled her over a log, removed sticks from her clothes, he takes it. The longing became an ache in his heart, and for half a moment he thought of Luda before striking the thought away.

Luda had been his soldier, his friend, his lover. But she had always cared more for him, and Aleksander had wanted it that way. *Never want anything*, he knew, *wanting leads to weakness.*

So why couldn't he let go of Starkov's hand?

* * *

When Starkov teold him she'd join him, that she wouldn't "get in his way" Aleksander didn't quite understand what he felt. It was as if his heart felt different, felt…lighter.

He didn't understand it, and he eyed it suspiciously, cautioning himself to proceed with care.

He didn't not like it, however.

* * *

The farmhouse was destroyed behind him, the heartrender was below his feet, and he was not surprised in the least.

The only thing shocking was Starkov. Her eyes welled up with unshed tears, he could see her breath heaving from anger, real anger, and he knew this is the first time she came across something like this. How? Who was she?

When she ran off to find the squaller, he swallows the bit of pride he feels when she captured him easily, in spite of her injuries. Starkov was not a good soldier, but she was a good fighter. He could see it in her eyes then, how the anger curled up in there like a cat waiting to strike. Starkov knew pain, she knew injustice, but not as a Grisha.

Who was she?

Headstrong, passionate, caring; but selfish and guarded and ignorant.

Perceptive.

“Who was Luda to you?” she asked, and he knew the answer she expects. “Love of his life” perhaps. He hedged the truth—barely. Something in her gaze, directed solely on him, with this look of…

What was that look in her eye?

“I don’t think I’m capable of love,” he told her, and it wa the only truth he had to give beside his name.

Starkov took his hands, and he forgot to breathe.

How haven’t they met before? What means of magic brought her to him?

Everything in his weather-worn body told him to remain on guard, but there wa that feeling in his gut again, pushing him forward at the same time. What if he told her more? What if he told her about his plan?

Wanting makes us weak, he reminded himself, and kept his mouth firmly shut.

Her light curled around the shadows of the barrier and shield she taught him to make, and everything in him quivered, barely able to stand up against her. Was she aware her light could pierce through his heart and cut him instantly?

And why did he want her to know this?

* * *

She opened herself up to him, and when he learns she was an orphan, raised to defend herself, he’s not in the least surprised. She still keeps herself guarded—he could see the hesitation in her eyes, the fear (of him? for herself?) and he gave her what he could in return.

After that night, encompassed by his shadows, by her light, he knew there was more to the two of them together than apart. He tested the waters, saw what she responds to, saw what hardened her eyes right back to where they began. He learned about her, and it was the easiest thing in the world to do.

When she told him she hid herself, for *seventeen years*, he was shocked stupid. It confirmed what he was doing though, reaffirmed his mission. He needed to stop the king; the Grisha must be free. His people were dying, they were killing each other, themselves.

It was unjust, and he had the power to stop it.

Aleksander nearly drowned when the soldiers took him by surprise, and he was mad enough to bring the world down. How stupid, how blind he'd been. His thoughts were bent toward Starkov; she was the only thing he was convinced was needed to turn the tide, and he had forgotten how to survive.

He was face down, tasting dirt, and he readied himself to break his arms if need be to get himself out of these restraints.

A whir of wind went by him and a grunt sounded above him. The slick sound of skin on skin, a rushing sound that sounded like the river—but it was blood, blood pouring from the bodies of the soldiers, from the Cut Alina has finally learned to use.

She was covered by a blanket, a blush on her cheeks, a fever in her stare. He carefully touched her cheek, brushed the hair away from her face.

"What do you feel?" he asked her, and he held her close to hide his smile when she answered.

They were two of the same coin, tossed in separate lifetimes.

The desire to make love to her in that field was nearly overpowering. As he held her in arms, he imagined what it would be like to be intertwined; his darkness within her, her lightness within him. The smell of her hair, river fresh, the feel of her soft skin beneath his palms. Aleksander wanted nothing more than to ravish her on the forest floor.

But Starkov was shaking from the new realization of her power, and Aleksander wouldn't touch a hair on her head she did not consent to. Under the rays of sunlight, within that tight embrace, Aleksander pulled her from him, and urged their immediate departure.

He was patient. He would wait a lifetime for her if he had to.

When they arrived in Os Alta, Aleksander lost something of her. She willfully held his hand, she leaned toward him as they walked, she looked into his eyes for answers.

But he could feel the quiet desperation she emanated; she wanted to want this, but she was not ready for it.

There was always a moment between another person, when they shouted and screamed and asked you, “Why? Why did you lie to me?” and this was why Aleksander did. He held everything close to his chest because there was always a moment, intended or not, when everything fell apart, and this was why wanting led to weakness.

But he gave her the scissors anyway; he didn’t stop her from raising the knife over his head.

Instead, he savored the moments in between. The feel of her breath against his cheek while she cut his hair; the touch of her hand against his chest while she plunged the knife into his back.

He wanted to kiss her through that pain.

In front of the king, she betrayed him, and he hardly cared. He knew before the first strike what would happen—he jumped up, a guard raised a sword toward him and Aleksander kicked out, kicked him so hard the guard’s head cracked onto the marble, blood spilling like wine from a chalice.

Aleksander screamed while his Starkov was dying on the floor, and it took a small army to bring him and his tied hands down.

Starkov’s name was Alina, and Aleksander wanted to laugh at how much he loved the sound of it.

He gripped her hand through the hole he’d made while she slept; his hands were numb but his mind slowly clicked away when she told him everything.

Alina was not a good soldier, he thought to himself wryly, but he was right about her. She’s scrappy, she’s fierce, she’s got more life in her than anyone in this world.

And it didn’t pain him to realize that she would be the one to bring it down.

He was envious, a little—he’d always thought it would be him on the edge of glory, giving the Grisha the freedom they deserved. But freedom is freedom, and if it came from the light rather than the unexpected shadows, so be it. He’d push her forward to make it happen.

*On the day of his end, he knew. There was a charge in the air, he could almost taste it, even through the bag they’ve tried to blind him with. He could almost feel the merzost calling to him from her—*leave this one with me, *he heard—and it’s unbelievable, but he wanted it to happen.*

They won’t die here. It’ll be an and, he knew, but something was coming, he could feel it.

It happened almost slowly to him. He could see Alina staring at the sky, mumbling under her breath, and it was as though she whispered right in his ear. The merzost screamed its pleasure and tumbled down from the sky, hitting everyone and everything in its path.

Aleksander jumped from his platform and ran to Alina; the chaos was thick around him and he made the most of it, using his now free hands to push his shadows around him, disguise him from the bright light from above.

He Cut down the king, he took her hand. It was the rightest feeling in the entire world.

He yanked her up, the sound of screams and terror were finally piercing through the veil and he could see the horror in her own eyes, the dawning on her face that she caused this.

“Be proud,” he wanted to tell her, but instead he dragged her along to safety. “You’ve freed us.”

The smell of white hot justice filled his lungs, and the merzost above was in no danger of faltering. It was so bright around them Aleksander doubled down on his shadows, pulling them down like a curtain so he could make out the shape of Alina’s lips while she muttered this one final spell, as she got ready to go home.

But there was that look in her eye, and he’d finally figured it out.

She wanted to succeed, and she took the reigns, pushing the magic she’d invoked into him, sending him forward in time—

She was a general, and he was the soldier all along.

In the veil between one moment and four hundred years, Aleksander finally felt true fear. What will he see in this new world? Will Alina be there? Will Ravka exist?

What will he be in this new place?

Darkness, that old friend he'd known so well, pulled him up and out, throwing him toward a blurry, familiar landscape.

He reached out his hand, and something pulled him from out of the ether.

* * *

Dark, unfamiliar eyes met his, and Aleksander didn't know who he was anymore.

Chapter End Notes

i cannot emphasize this enough: unreliable narrator

i firmly believe that aleksander could have been saved after the creation of the fold. he wanted to be saved. alina went back for the sake of her own journey, not to save aleksander, but to find herself.

aleksander is always worthy of saving.

EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alina checked the ticking timepiece in her hand. It was more than four hundred years old and it still worked like, well.

She looked out at the virile landscape before her: the trees swayed in the heavy winds, the mansion, while mostly lost to time, still held up several columns of stone. Alina's heart fluttered in her throat, thinking of so long ago, where her story upended, where she failed…

And soon it would be time. Ten more minutes, perhaps.

"Sol Koroleva," Genya called to her, and Alina turned to her. Lovely as ever, Genya smiled up at Alina with both familiarity and guarded respect. "We have everything in place."

Alina smiled and nodded to her, and Genya left her be, returning her to her pensive state.

Things are not the same as she was before. The people whom she had grown with, been changed by, she was the one to seek them out. She knew them from the very pit of her soul, but all they had known her as was Sol Koroleva, Queen of Sunlight.

She, the progeny of the Corrupted Saint, the One Who Created the Rupture.

How she had loathed the idea, but Baghra was apparently a one trick pony, and it did the job well enough.

She watched Genya then, from the corner of her eye, who now smiled coquettishly at David. She was a more joyful Genya than she'd known—this one was less snappish wit, and more flirtatious jokes. Of course Alina was glad for the change—she would never have Genya go through what she had in another lifetime, and yet…

They were all different. Just slightly so.

So many things were from that other time. Some pitfalls she had stumbled into just like Aleksander had.

Politics, she thought, wriggling her shoulders beneath her cloak like ruffling feathers. *Ugh*. She detested them—avoided them—and so there were many problems now that Aleksander had never had to deal with. For one, the entire royal line had always refused to see her as an advisor—creating a cavernous stream of light that hovered over their palace emitting the occasional face-eating monster could sour relations—so she'd had to force change through alternate means.

Under Baghra's advisement, she had joined the church as a Saint, at first, and ruled separately from the monarchy. It coincided with their power, but the separation of church and state caused as many issues as it fixed.

Getting anything done was insanely slow. Integration was paramount, Alina knew, because without it the Grisha would never be able to see themselves as leaders. There were plenty of Grisha clergy, but no Grisha majors or generals. There were Grisha teachers, but no Grisha political advisors.

It was a chasm Alina needed to bridge, but four hundred years hadn't been enough to build it.

Alina checked the timepiece again. Five minutes. The birds sang their song in the forest, unaware of her nerves. They almost steadied them that way, while the birds flitted from tree to tree, completely unbothered by the act of magic that was about to take place.

But there were positives, too, to Alina's rule.

The Rupture had never been quite as damaging to the world as the Fold had been. Truly, some called it a metaphor for its placement over the royal palace—the devout said it served a reminder for the king and queen to never forget that the Saints were watching them.

The royals sure hated that.

The Ravkan economy was booming. The pilgrimage from West Ravka to the east, to see and worship at the sight of the rupture, provided much wealth to Ravka domestically as well. Of course, there were the monsters to contend with, but they usually only came out when the sun was the brightest, and most knew now to lock their doors and keep their windows tightly shut to prevent any light demons from crossing their thresholds. Those who had none were offered shelter in churches, and those who didn't heed the mid-day bell, well…

Tragedies happened every day.

Beyond that, Alina urged the church to invest in the Fabrikators to create a network of train and transportation routes all throughout Ravka. It was said all throughout the world that one could cross Ravka as fast as the crow flies.

But the borders between Fjerda and Ravka were ever changing—a huge chunk had been taken out about a century ago, and never quite regained. Shu Han was now laying claim to several areas of Ravka, and soon they would have them—there was no army left to protect Ravka—no Second Army could yet be reformed. And with their wealth of resources, Ravka was a juicy fruit, ripe for the taking.

Alina felt the world shake, and her heart began to spin in her chest.

"Here!" Mal called from a hundred yards away, "I've got him!"

Alina tried not to run, and failed in doing so. Her long, white robes flew out behind her and her hair nearly fell from its povyazka.

She could see something, Mal hovering over a body, and terror struck her. *Did he make it?* she thought, her stomach dropping. Did he die, did the merzost take this from her, this one last thing?

Saints save them all if so, she promised to the Rupture under her breath.

But then she saw his hand move, his perfect, hale hand, and clench the grass beneath their feet. Alina stopped in her tracks. Tolya and Mal helped him to a sitting position, to his feet then.

Alina stood back, behind him, unable to take a step closer.

She could see he looked terrible—Saints! That shock of dark hair, those broad shoulders—he looked exactly the same as that day.

Four hundred years, and she could hear the timepiece ticking again in her pocket. Four hundred years and she was not alone anymore.

When he finally turned, he did so absently, slowly. He didn't know where he was—or he did, but it was all new, unfamiliar; yet *so* familiar at the same time.

When she saw the whites of his eyes, that dark gray, stony glare turn on her, she forgot to breathe.

Alina remained like a statue, staring at him as though if she moved, he might disappear.

His breath halted in his chest when he saw her. She let him watch her and she was dimly aware that Mal and Tolya backed away from them.

They all did, her soldiers, her—were they friends? not like they were, not like he is to her—and Alina still doesn't move.

"Aleksander," she whispered, a small dare in the green field around them.

He reached out a hand, and touched the side of her face. His dirty, smoky fingers ran down her smooth cheek, and his eyes traced every part of her more closely than she'd ever seen him look at anything before.

He opened his mouth, then closed it. His head tilted and a strand of hair fell into his face—she longed to move it. His fingers touched the povyazka, the parts of her hair, that white hair he had just seen, barely visible underneath the cap—

"Is this real?" he asked her.

She couldn't speak, so she nodded her head, feeling the pads of his fingertips rest against her cheek so delicately, just a shadow of a touch. She released a sigh so deep it sounded like the wind, and she lifted up her own hand to take his.

"I've been waiting a long time for you, Aleksander."

She moved forward, toward him, the only thing she knew existed in that moment. She turned her head and kissed his palm. Alina looked up into his eyes, and the smile that waited just for her finally began to spread over his face.

"I have plans for us," she said.

Aleksander leaned down and kissed her slowly. He kissed her like the world was ending, like it was just beginning. The sun shined a little brighter in that moment, and the shadows in the forest deepened into a heavy contrast against that blue sky.

Hand in hand, against the world, the two living Saints began their real journey there, that day in the field, four hundred years from the time they had first met.

“Let’s begin,” he said.

Alina smiled.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading i love you <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!